

Against Smoothness

Literature in the Machine Age

Toward a Competency Model
of Curatorial Writing

Birgitta Welzel

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Against Smoothness. Literature in the Machine Age

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Foreword

The following dialogic essays are intended as contributions to a future competency framework for AI-assisted creative writing. This framework addresses a fundamental research gap: While Large Language Models are used millions of times for rapid, low-effort text production—a use that has led to justified stigmatization—the inverse question remains systematically unexplored: Can these systems be used to create aesthetically sophisticated literature—prose, poetry, drama—that meets literary standards in the strictest sense? Technical research ignores this question because it operates with reductionist metrics. Literary studies ignore it because they treat AI as a theoretical object or threat, not as a curatorial tool. Writing pedagogy remains pre-theoretical and focuses on efficiency gains. Process research on literarily ambitious AI curation does not exist.

The framework presented here understands the author—drawing on Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of postproduction art practice and Luciano Floridi's notion of "distant writing"—as a strategic curator who selects and shapes the literarily necessary from the abundance of machine-generated possibilities. This process requires the highest investment of time, labor, and competence.

At the center stand seven authorial competencies—world knowledge, psychological logic, stylistics, dramaturgy, narratology, cultural references, and poetics—which build upon the literary tradition from Aristotle to the present and secure aesthetic judgment. These are complemented by three meta-competencies (iterative control, ethical judgment, and system diagnosis) that define the specific craft of working with AI systems.

The framework pursues a dual objective: On one hand, it aims to demonstrate how grounded literary knowledge can compensate for the structural weaknesses of statistical language models through precise curatorial selection. On the other hand, it seeks to transform AI from a mere text generator into an instrument of conscious literary design—not through naive delegation, but through informed curatorial control.

The dialogic form was chosen because it allows the competencies to be presented not as an abstract taxonomy, but developed through concrete engagement with the great systematizers and practitioners of literary history. That these conversations take place beyond time—with interlocutors who have all passed away—underscores the enduring value of their theories. Each conversation offers deepened

reflection on one or more competencies while simultaneously revealing where the limits of systematization lie—where trained intuition must replace pure technique.

Birgitta Welzel, February 2026

Mimesis 2.0: On the Art of Curation

A Workshop Conversation with Erich Auerbach

A sun-drenched terrace in Istanbul, 1946. On the table lie manuscript pages and a crumpled newspaper clipping. Both have notebooks and a cup of Turkish coffee in front of them.

Auerbach: (He pushes the newspaper clipping across the table.) I read this interview with you. You describe something in it that hasn't let me go: your reluctance to take moral sides in human conflicts. While others become indignant or sympathetic, you ask yourself: "What if?" That's a peculiar gift. Or a curse.

Author: (smiles) Both, I would say. It has often made me lonely. Who wants a friend who holds your hand in misfortune but is already playing through the dramaturgical possibilities in her head?

Auerbach: (chuckles) But it's precisely what distinguishes the great realists. With Balzac or Stendhal you sense this gaze: They don't observe society to judge it, but to understand its mechanics. And then—and this is crucial—they bend these mechanics to show what would be possible.

Author: Precisely this "bending" occupies me. I'm working on a competency model for creative writing. There are certain competencies an author must master to actually form literature from "what if"—not mere thought experiments, but texts with that "earthly historicity" you write about in *Mimesis*.

Auerbach: (leans forward with interest, takes his notebook) A competency model. That sounds systematic. How many competencies?

Author: Seven, I think. But I'm not certain whether this number is final. Some overlap, and I can't yet clearly determine which of them are purely technical skills and which are better understood as attitudes. Nor is it entirely clear to me which are specific to literature and which might also be relevant to architecture, music, or painting.

Auerbach: (writes: "Competency model - 7? Overlaps") Then let us sort through them together. Name the competencies for me.

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Author: (opens her notebook) World knowledge, psychological logic, stylistics, dramaturgy, narratology, cultural references. And then poetics, which occupies a special role—it seems to coordinate the others.

Auerbach: A special role?

Author: Poetics is aesthetic responsibility, the legislation of form. It decides the why, while the other six operationalize the how and what. But let us begin with the first six.

Auerbach: (notes: "Poetics = meta-level, legislation") Please. I'm curious.

The First Competency: World Knowledge

Author: The first competency is world knowledge—not as ornament, but as foundation. If I place a character in a Venetian glass workshop of the 16th century, I must know how work was done there. Not everything, but enough so that the world offers resistance.

Auerbach: (writes: "World knowledge = resistance") Resistance. That's the right word. In *Mimesis* I tried to show that realism doesn't mean copying the world, but representing it so that its gravity becomes palpable. With Balzac, a bankruptcy isn't just a psychological event—it's a social catastrophe, anchored in commercial law, in class conceptions, in class dynamics.

Author: (nods, writes: "Gravity of the world - Balzac") Exactly that. But my problem is access to this knowledge. The library is one source, experts another, field research a third—like Zola in the coal mines of Anzin. But there are also newer possibilities I'm currently exploring. Faster possibilities.

Auerbach: Faster than the library?

Author: More efficient, I would say. But the danger is that this efficiency closes gaps that would be productive. If I don't know exactly what a medieval daily schedule in the monastery was like, I must invent—and in this invention lies freedom. Total access could suffocate the story under facts.

Auerbach: (leans back) That's a remarkable thought. When I worked on *Mimesis*, here in Istanbul, I had to work much from memory. I didn't have the great libraries of Europe at my disposal. And precisely these gaps let the text breathe. Had I had total access, the book might have been more correct, but also more suffocating.

Author: (writes: "productive gap - Auerbach Istanbul") That's why I must learn to consciously not ask. To actively cultivate ignorance. That requires discipline—the discipline of refusal.

Auerbach: (smiles, notes: "Discipline of refusal") Discipline is your element, I notice. But tell me: Is world knowledge a technical competency in the narrow sense?

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Author: The research itself is technical—one learns how to find sources, how to evaluate them. But the decision about which knowledge is relevant, which detail stays and which disappears—that's curatorial. Almost like curating an exhibition: One has more material than one can show. The selection is the art.

Auerbach: (underlines in his notebook: "curatorial") So you see the author not as a creator from nothing, but as someone who chooses from possibilities?

Author: (grimaces) Yes. I don't believe in the romantic genius concept. Writing is learnable, is craft. And if it's craft, it must be systematizable.

Auerbach: (writes: "Anti-genius concept, systematizability") That's a radical position. And one that's foreign to most German literary scholars. They analyze what others have written, but they don't believe one can derive a curriculum for writing from it.

Author: That was precisely my problem with my studies. Theory remained sterile. But I believe it can be made productive. World knowledge is the foundation for that. Without gravity, the text floats into arbitrariness.

The Second Competency: Psychological Logic

Auerbach: (becomes more serious) Now we come to the heart of the matter. In my chapter on Dante I wrote of the "immutable determinacy" of the soul. Every figure in the *Divine Comedy* is an eternal concentrate of itself. With Dostoevsky, on the other hand, we see the fragmentation of the self. How do you grasp the psychology of a character?

Author: That's the second competency in my model: psychological logic. Not as kitchen psychology—not the simple "She is sad because her husband betrayed her"—but as a logic of ambivalence. Are you familiar with Sigmund Freud?

Auerbach: (smiles, writes the name) Of course. Vienna wasn't large. He gave us the unconscious—or burdened us with it, depending on how you see it.

Author: Freud showed us that people don't understand themselves. There's the "ego" that wants to be rational, and the "id" that's drive-governed. Literature emerges where the ego fails. But the problem: When I design a character, she's initially often too insightful to me. She understands herself too well, can explain herself. And that makes her smooth, uninteresting.

Auerbach: You must give her the blind spot.

Author: (looks up, writes: "blind spot") Exactly. A character must not be too insightful. She must lie to herself to survive. That makes her human. But the curatorial question is: How much self-knowledge is psychologically plausible, and how much is too much?

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Auerbach: (thoughtfully) That reminds me of Shakespeare's King Lear. He sees his own blindness only when it's too late. Psychological truth lies in self-deception. (writes: "Lear - self-deception as truth") But you're asking about the how. And there I must confess: That's instinct. Or experience. Or both.

Author: (sets down her cup, speaks calmly but firmly) Instinct cannot be systematized. And I need a systematic approach, otherwise I have no model, only advice. The question is: Isn't there a third category between pure technique and pure instinct—trained intuition?

Auerbach: (raises his gaze) Trained intuition. That's a precise term. (notes it) Perhaps psychological logic truly isn't a purely technical competency. But rather a mixture of world knowledge—you must understand how psychology functions, after all—and a sensitivity for the unsaid.

Author: (writes: "trained intuition = technique + sensitivity") Empathy as a teachable competency. Through reading, through observation, through living. Dostoevsky sat in prison for years. He didn't know suffering from books.

Auerbach: But you must find other ways.

Author: I'm finding them now.

The Third Competency: Stylistics

Auerbach: Let us come to stylistics. That's my terrain. (opens his notebook to a new page) In *Mimesis* I showed how the ancient separation of styles—the high for tragedy, the low for comedy—collapses in modernity. With Zola, suddenly the everyday life of a miner can be narrated in the high style. That's revolutionary.

Author: (nods) And it shows: Style isn't ornament, but a means of cognition. When I recently revised a text, I noticed that a character suddenly spoke differently—more educated than befitted her social position. At first I wanted to correct it. Then I asked myself: What if this isn't an error but a secret? What if this woman is hiding her origins?

Auerbach: (writes eagerly) Ah! That's exactly what Leo Spitzer called the "linguistic click"—that small shift in expression that reveals the entire psychic structure. Spitzer was my colleague in Romance studies. He searched in every text for that moment where language reveals more than the author consciously wanted to say.

Author: (notes: "Spitzer - linguistic click") I didn't know Spitzer. But there's a later thinker, Roland Barthes, who will develop this further. He'll speak of the "reality effect"—those seemingly superfluous details that are only there to say: "This really happened." A thermometer on the wall that no one reads. A stain on the tablecloth.

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Auerbach: (writes: "Barthes - reality effect") But how does one decide which detail stays and which is merely ballast?

Author: By knowing that style is always a decision about the *aptum*—appropriateness. You showed in *Mimesis* that stylistics is always also a decision about social reality. A conscious stylistic break can be truth. But for that one must know the norm.

Auerbach: (writes and underlines "aptum" in his notebook) That's why you need erudition. You must know how Dahn's pseudo-classicism sounds to avoid it. You must know Hemingway's hardness to hear where imitation becomes mannerism. Without this competency you would only produce smooth, dead sentences.

Author: (writes: "Pseudo-classicism vs. genuine hardness") You build an arsenal of erudition to fight against smoothness.

Auerbach: (laughs softly) Yes. But tell me: Is stylistics a purely technical competency?

Author: Partially. Knowledge of rhetorical figures—anaphora, chiasmus, hyperbaton—that's technical. But the decision of when to deploy them is connected to poetics. To aesthetic responsibility.

Auerbach: (nods, writes: "Stylistics = how, Poetics = why") Exactly. Stylistics is the how. Poetics is the why. But without the how, one cannot implement the why.

The Fourth Competency: Dramaturgy

Author: The fourth competency is dramaturgy—the architecture of fate. You know those moments when you read a story and think: "That should never have happened"? Not because it's illogical, but because it's too predictable?

Auerbach: Of course. That's the danger of mechanical plotting. Aristotle taught us the *peripeteia*—the sudden reversal from fortune to misfortune. But with bad authors it becomes merely a cheap trick.

Author: Exactly. There are certain patterns everyone knows today. Joseph Campbell described the "hero's journey" in the 1940s—the hero leaves the familiar world, passes trials, returns transformed. The problem is: The schema has become a template.

Auerbach: (writes: "Campbell - hero's journey, 1940s") An instruction manual for stories?

Author: (smiles) Exactly. That's why I use dramaturgy not as a recipe but as a map. I know where the well-trodden paths lie—and can then consciously diverge. I place the *anagnorisis*, the moment of recognition, not at the end but at the beginning. I prepare a catastrophe and then... nothing happens. The characters live on in expectation of disaster.

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Auerbach: (laughs) The sword that never falls. That's cruel. But it sounds like real life. And like conscious sabotage of the expected.

Author: (writes: "Sabotage of expectation") Sabotage. Yes, that's a good word. But the question is: How does one distinguish bold deviation from stupid error?

Auerbach: (sets down his cup) That's the most difficult question. And I fear it cannot be fully systematized. One needs a feeling for dramatic necessity. For what this specific story needs.

Author: Again instinct. Or better: trained intuition.

Auerbach: (nods) Trained instinct. You can learn to recognize dramaturgical patterns. You can read Aristotle, the French classicists, drama theory. But in the end you must feel: This deviation is right. This one isn't.

Author: (notes: "dramatic necessity = trained intuition") Dramaturgy as a system of obstacles. That prevents the story from simply "flowing along" like bad prose. But the placement of the obstacles—that's the art.

The Fifth Competency: Narratology

Author: The fifth competency in the model is narratology—the mechanics of time and perspective. You have in your chapter on Virginia Woolf that wonderful passage about the brown stocking...

Auerbach: (laughs) Ah yes, Mrs. Ramsay knitting. A single moment that stretches over pages, while years disappear in a subordinate clause.

Author: Exactly that! But how does one control this technically? There will be a French theorist, Gérard Genette, who in the 1970s will develop a precise vocabulary—analepsis for flashback, prolepsis for foreshadowing, focalization for the question: Who sees? Who knows?

Auerbach: (writes: "Genette - 1970s - Analepsis, Prolepsis, Focalization") Focalization... that's the question of the narrator's standpoint?

Author: More than that. It's the question of whether the narrator is omniscient like God or only sees what a single character sees. In the Bible, God is the narrator—he knows everything but remains silent about motives. You called that "backgrounding."

Auerbach: (nods appreciatively) And in modernity?

Author: In modernity we constantly switch perspective. I can narrate a scene from a child's point of view who doesn't understand the erotic tension between adults. And then show the same scene from

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an adult's point of view. The reader sees more than any individual character—that creates dramatic irony.

Auerbach: (writes: "dramatic irony through perspective shift") That's the art of shadowing and illuminating. But how does one curate this concretely?

Author: I must consciously choose the perspective. Decide: Do I show the character's inner view, or do I stay outside? But I admit: This decision is sometimes still difficult for me. I'm uncertain whether I've chosen the right distance—and that's precisely one of the reasons I'm speaking with you. You're a systematizer. You can help me see where my model still has gaps.

Auerbach: (smiles) This uncertainty is good. It shows you understand the significance of the decision. Narratology is a very technical competency. One can learn it, one can systematize it. But the application requires—again—trained intuition.

Author: (exhales) Trained intuition. That's the pattern running through everything.

The Sixth Competency: Cultural References

Auerbach: (gazes at the Bosphorus) We come to a topic that's sacred to me. In *Mimesis* I spoke of "figural interpretation"—how an event in the Old Testament prefigures one in the New. For me, literature is a conversation across centuries. No work stands alone.

Author: That's the sixth competency in the model: cultural references and intertextuality. But how does one prevent the text from collapsing under the weight of allusions?

Auerbach: (chuckles) By choosing the spirits wisely, I assume?

Author: Yes. I use references as anchor points of meaning. If I write a scene in which a son leaves his father, I can let subtle echoes of the parable of the prodigal son resonate—but in such a way that they seem cynical in the modern world. The echo breaks the original.

Auerbach: (writes: "Echo breaks original") That's the palimpsest—one writes on old parchments, and the old shows through. But how much education may one presuppose in the reader?

Author: That's the difficulty. Too many references—the text becomes hermetic, elitist. Too few—it loses depth. I experiment with references I'm not sure will be recognized. But they still create a resonance space, even for readers who don't consciously recognize them.

Auerbach: (nods) That's clever. An allusion doesn't always have to be deciphered to work. It can also create meaning unconsciously. (pauses) But isn't that dangerous? Doesn't one risk losing oneself in one's own erudition?

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Author: (calmly) Yes. That's a real danger. That's why this competency must be connected to poetics. The question is always: Does this reference serve the text? Or does it only serve my vanity?

Auerbach: (laughs, notes: "Reference vs. vanity") The most honest question an author can ask themselves.

The Seventh Competency: Poetics

Auerbach: (becomes thoughtful) We've discussed six competencies. You said poetics occupies a special role. Explain that to me.

Author: Poetics is aesthetic responsibility. I decide: Should this text please or disturb? Should it be hermetic or accessible? Should it offer catharsis or deny it? This decision coordinates all the other competencies.

Auerbach: (writes: "Poetics = coordination of all competencies") The legislator of form.

Author: (looks up) Yes, exactly that. If I decide: This text follows the principle of the *nouveau roman*—no psychology, only surface, objective description—then that influences my stylistics, my dramaturgy, my narratology. Poetics is the law that stands above all other competencies.

Auerbach: (underlines the sentence) But how does one learn that? How does one decide which law applies to this text?

Author: That's the question where I need your help. I can now describe the six operative competencies somewhat systematically. But poetics—there I'm still groping. Are there criteria? Is there a method?

Auerbach: (is silent for a long time) That... that's different for every text. For every author. You must ask yourself: What do I want to achieve with this text? And then: What form does that require?

Author: But isn't that trained intuition again?

Auerbach: Yes. But this time at a higher level. Poetics is meta-intuition. It's intuition about the law itself.

Author: (sets down her cup) If you could systematize everything, it would no longer be art. It would be engineering.

Auerbach: (looks at her sharply) No. You're not an engineer. An engineer wouldn't think about poetics. She would build. But you struggle. And this struggle is proof that you're an artist. Even if you don't feel like one.

Author: (writes: "Poetics = meta-intuition, law over laws")

The Overlaps and Ambiguities

Auerbach: (stands up, goes to the terrace railing) Let us recapitulate. You've presented seven competencies to me. The question is: Are you certain this classification is complete? That they don't overlap?

Author: (follows him) No, I'm not certain. Stylistics and narratology overlap. When I decide from which perspective I narrate, that's also a stylistic decision.

Auerbach: Yes. And psychological logic and dramaturgy also overlap. When a character makes a decision that's dramatically necessary, it must also be psychologically plausible.

Author: The question is: Is that a flaw in my model?

Auerbach: (turns around) No. Not wrong. Just imprecise. And that's acceptable. Every systematic approach has imprecisions. Mine in *Mimesis* too. I tried to tell the entire European literary history in a single line—from Homer to Virginia Woolf. But in truth there are ruptures, overlaps, contradictions. The systematic approach is a tool. Not a dogma.

Author: (writes: "Systematic approach = tool, not dogma") That helps me. I thought I had to order everything seamlessly. But you're saying: The overlaps aren't my failure. They're the complexity of the subject matter.

Auerbach: (nods) Exactly. And something else: You wondered which of these competencies are technical and which aren't. Which are specific to literature and which also apply to other arts.

Author: Yes. Do you have an assessment of that?

Auerbach: (leans against the railing) I would say: World knowledge is universal. An architect needs it just as much as a novelist. Psychological logic is also universal—you need it in theater, in film, in painting, when you want to represent people. Stylistics is specific to language-based arts—literature, but also rhetoric. Dramaturgy you find in all narrative arts—novel, drama, film. Narratology, in turn, is specific to narrative texts. Cultural references are universal—every art stands in tradition. And poetics is most universal. Every artist must decide: Why am I doing this? And how?

Author: (writes a table: "universal / specific") That's a very helpful classification. I now see more clearly where the boundaries lie. And where they blur.

Auerbach: (also notes: "Competency model - boundaries and overlaps productive")

The Working Counterpart

Auerbach: (looks at her for a long time) You've developed this model of seven competencies. But I have the impression you're not working alone. There's something you haven't fully told me.

Author: I've found a working counterpart. One that helps me explore possibilities. That delivers material I then shape. It has no memory in the human sense, but it has access to an archive—an echo of all literature.

Auerbach: (is silent for a moment) A working counterpart without a soul, but with total memory. (He looks at the sea.) That sounds like a very modern, very lonely form of mastery. You manage potentials. You curate from abundance.

Author: But I never delegate the decision about what's necessary. My counterpart delivers the possible to me. I decide about the necessary. That cannot be delegated.

Auerbach: (nods slowly) Then you've understood what authorship means. Not production from nothing. But choice. Distinction. Responsibility. (He extends his hand) If you anchor these seven competencies as you've described, then I have no fear for the future of literature. You've shown me that mimesis doesn't dwell in the pen, but in the power of discrimination. Go back to your workshop. Tame infinity. And never forget: The decision about what's necessary is the only thing no system can ever calculate.

Author: Thank you, Erich. The inventory is complete. Now the work begins.

The sun stands low over the Bosphorus. Auerbach gathers his manuscripts, closes his notebook—in it names like Barthes, Genette, Campbell, terms like "trained intuition," "sabotage of expectation," "palimpsest." The author looks at her own notes: seven competencies, tentatively outlined, marked with overlaps, but solid enough to build upon.

On the Art of Building Worlds: Research, Knowledge, and Curatorial Intelligence

A Workshop Conversation with Umberto Eco

Umberto Eco's office at the University of Bologna, Department of Semiotics, on a sunny afternoon in March 2015. The room is filled with books; on the desk lie notes and a strange object—a hand-drawn floor plan that looks like the map of a labyrinth. Both have notebooks in front of them. The Author enters the room.

Eco: (looks up, smiles) Ah, Signora! Please sit down. I read an interview with you—you said you only began writing fiction in late 2025. That surprised me. Why so late? You studied German literature, earned a doctorate—why didn't you start earlier?

Author: (sits down, opens her notebook) Because I knew too well how badly I would write. Studying German literature taught me to dissect literature—but not to create it. I could see every mistake before I made it. That paralyzes.

Eco: (nods) The critic's disease. I know it well. I too had to turn fifty and practice semiotics for twenty years before I found the courage to write a novel. But in the interview you mentioned "2025"—apparently you come from a time that still lies ahead of me. What changes in these ten years?

Author: I began working with AI—with artificial intelligence, more precisely with large language models. These are machines trained on the basis of enormous amounts of text that can generate coherent texts.

Eco: (leans forward with interest, writes: "AI - language models") I've heard of artificial intelligence—in the fifties and sixties there were first approaches. Chomsky's generative grammar, the early attempts at machine translation. But machines that write literary texts? Tell me more.

Author: (writes: "Eco - AI context 1950s/60s") Imagine: A machine that has read billions of texts—novels, essays, scholarly articles, dialogues—and from these patterns learns how language functions. These language models—also called LLMs, Large Language Models—are just one specific type of AI, but

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the one relevant for text production. I can give this machine an instruction—called "prompting"—and it then delivers text to me.

Eco: (notes: "Prompting = instruction") Prompting?

Author: The art of instructing the machine precisely. It's almost like a new cultural technique—comparable to learning to read and write. One must learn which instructions work, which don't, how to steer the machine. The AI delivers text by default as if a ghostwriter had written it—finished and formatted, seemingly autonomous. But through competent prompting one can tame this material, strictly subordinate it to one's own will, degrade it to raw material that one then shapes.

Eco: (fascinated, writes eagerly) A machine that writes—but you are the one who tells it how to write. That's extraordinary. As a semiotician this interests me enormously: The machine produces signifiers—sign-vehicles—but you add the signifieds, the meanings. But also disturbing. How does one control such a thing? How does one prevent being... swallowed?

Author: (nods, writes: "Signifier/signified - Eco's terminology") That's precisely my question. I'm working on a competency model for AI-assisted creative writing. A central component of this model is seven competencies: world knowledge, psychological logic, stylistics, dramaturgy, narratology, cultural references, and poetics. These competencies help me curate the AI instead of being curated by it.

Eco: (nods slowly, notes: "7 competencies - model") Seven competencies. A theoretical framework to control the machine. But let's get concrete. The first competency you said—world knowledge?

Author: Yes. A text without gravity is a balloon drifting into arbitrariness.

Eco: (laughs, underlines "gravity") Perfect! Then we're already in the thick of it. But first... (leafs through his notebook) These language models—will there already be literature about them? As a semiotician this fascinates me enormously. If your time truly lies ten years in my future...

Author: (smiles) There will be approaches. Margaret Boden will write about creative AI, Mark Riedl on interactive narratives, Tony Veale on creative systems. Much will still be emerging—just like my model.

Eco: (notes the names, underlines them) Fascinating. (puts down his pen) But let's get to the concrete. You use this machine for world knowledge. How exactly?

The Three Conventional Sources

Author: Let me first speak of the traditional paths. When you wrote *The Name of the Rose*, you had three sources: the library, experts, and the field?

Eco: (nods) Exactly. The library provided me with medieval manuscripts, theological tracts, herbal books. The experts—I remember a medievalist in Bologna who explained to me the intricacies of the

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Franciscan poverty debate, a paleographer who showed me how a scriptorium functions. And the field... I walked through monasteries, studied floor plans, counted stairs.

Author: (writes: "3 sources - library/experts/field") You built the abbey before you wrote the novel.

Eco: Not just built—I lived in it. I knew exactly how many steps a monk needed from the scriptorium to the library, how the light fell through the windows, where shadows gathered. Without this precision the novel would have been hollow.

Author: That's exactly what Émile Zola did for *Germinal*. He descended into the coal mines of Anzin, spoke with miners, breathed the coal air. He didn't just want to know how a mine works—he wanted to know how it smells, how it feels to be virtually crushed by two hundred meters of stone.

Eco: (nods, notes: "Zola - sensory research") Field research delivers the uncodifiable—that which no book can describe because it lies below language. But it's also dangerous.

Author: Why dangerous?

Eco: Because it tempts one to tell everything. One has experienced so much, noted so much—and then one wants to prove it to the reader. The result is what the Germans so beautifully call "Materialschlacht"—material battle. The text suffocates under facts.

Author: Info-dumping.

Eco: (laughs, writes the term) Is that the modern term? Excellent. Yes. The author must learn that ninety percent of their research must remain invisible. Like an iceberg.

Author: (notes: "Iceberg principle - Hemingway") Hemingway's theory. But how does one decide what stays and what disappears?

Eco: (smiles) That's the art of curation, isn't it? One must understand that world knowledge has two functions. The first is plausibility—the world must function, must offer resistance. When my monk goes through a door, this door must be architecturally possible. But the second function is more subtle: meaning. A detail only becomes literary when it's not just true but also tells something. In semiotics we would say: The detail must not only refer—it must signify.

Author: (writes: "refer vs. signify") Can you make that concrete?

Eco: Take a door key in a medieval novel. As a pure object—as reference—it's a piece of iron with certain dimensions. But as a sign it can mean power (who has access?), secret (what is locked?), or control (who possesses it?). The detail "key" becomes literary because it's embedded in a sign system.

The Unreliability of Experts

Author: You mentioned experts—the medievalist, the paleographer. That fascinates me as a source: the possibility of working dialogically, asking targeted questions when a concrete problem arises during writing. A book only gives what it contains. An expert can answer the specific question that only emerges in the moment of writing. That's already an approximation of the way of working with AI. But what if these experts err? Or are ideologically colored?

Eco: (becomes serious, notes: "Experts - limits") Ah, that's a delicate topic. Tell me.

Author: Take Thomas Mann. For *Doctor Faustus* he consulted Theodor W. Adorno, one of the most brilliant music theorists of his time. Adorno provided him with the theory of twelve-tone technique—and Mann wove it so tightly into his novel that it looked as if his protagonist Leverkühn had invented this technique.

Eco: (nods) And then came the scandal with Arnold Schoenberg.

Author: (writes: "Adorno-Schoenberg conflict") Exactly. Schoenberg was beside himself. The public believed a syphilitic devil-pacter had made his invention. Mann had to add a clarification in later editions. But here's the question: Was Adorno's information wrong?

Eco: (considers) No. It was correct—but its use was... problematic. That's the difference between truth and appropriateness. In semiotics we would say: Adorno was right about the denotatum—the factual content. But he hadn't foreseen how Mann would steer the connotations—the associative levels of meaning.

Author: (notes: "Denotatum vs. connotation") Or take Bram Stoker. He relied on the Hungarian professor Ármin Vámbéry for information about the historical Vlad Drăculea. Vámbéry told him that this name meant "son of the devil" and that there was a vampire myth about him in Romania. Both were false—or at least strongly distorted. But *Dracula* works anyway.

Eco: (laughs) Of course! Because Stoker didn't want historical truth but mythical truth. The misinformation was productive. It opened a space for fiction. Semiotically speaking: Vámbéry delivered a false encyclopedia—a false knowledge system—but this false system was internally coherent enough to carry a fictional world.

Author: (writes: "false encyclopedia - productive") And then there are ideological distortions. If Joseph Conrad had consulted colonial missionaries for *Heart of Darkness*, he would have received European prejudices as facts. The book reproduces this perspective anyway, but had Conrad actively asked such experts, it would have been even worse.

Eco: (nods, notes: "ideological codes") Human experts are not only hard to obtain and slow—they can also err. And sometimes their error is structurally conditioned. In semiotics we speak of "codes"—

cultural sign systems that steer our interpretation. Every expert is embedded in codes. A colonial missionary would filter facts for you through the code of imperialism. That brings us back to your AI?

Author: Yes. Because the AI is unreliable differently, but not more unreliable.

The AI as Fourth Source

Eco: (leans forward) What can this machine do that library, expert, and field cannot?

Author: It can create a complete world in seconds. When I tell it: "Describe a Venetian glassmaker's workshop in the 16th century," it doesn't deliver a list of facts but a narrative miniature—with figures, smells, light, social hierarchies. The AI has already accomplished the first transformation: from knowledge to literature.

Eco: (skeptically, writes: "AI - knowledge → literature") But where does it get this ability? You said it learns from texts—so it only reproduces what others have already written?

Author: Exactly. It's generic—an average of a thousand texts. And that's simultaneously its advantage and its danger. The advantage: I immediately receive a functioning setting. And here's the crucial point—it's much easier for me to tame, trim, and artfully reshape this already created, comprehensive world as raw material than to build it from scratch myself. That's an extreme facilitation of work. It allows me to concentrate on my actual work.

Eco: (leans forward with interest, notes: "AI as scaffolding supplier") You mean the machine takes over the... groundwork? The scaffolding? That's semiotically fascinating: The machine delivers the paradigmatic axis—all possible elements that could belong in a Venetian glassmaker text. But you choose on the syntagmatic axis—you decide which elements actually appear in which sequence.

Author: (writes enthusiastically: "paradigmatic/syntagmatic") That's precise. Can you explain that for non-semioticians?

Eco: Gladly. Imagine a sentence: "The master takes the hammer." The paradigmatic axis would be: all subjects that would be possible (master, apprentice, visitor), all verbs (takes, lifts, throws), all objects (hammer, tongs, glass rod). The syntagmatic axis is the actual sequence you choose. The AI delivers the paradigm—you build the syntagma.

Author: (nods) But the danger is: This scaffolding is smooth, predictable, without singularity. It lacks the idiosyncratic that makes a world real.

Eco: And this machine—can it make mistakes? Can it... invent what isn't true?

World Knowledge

Author: (smiles) Constantly. It's called "hallucinations." It invents historical events that sound plausible but never happened. It cites books that don't exist. It combines facts from different centuries and presents them as a coherent epoch.

Eco: It lies? Without knowing it?

Author: (writes: "Hallucinations = unconscious lies") It has no awareness of it. It only combines patterns. But yes—it produces fiction while pretending to deliver facts.

Eco: (thoughtfully) Semiotically this is highly interesting. The machine confuses the mode of utterance. It asserts facticity while producing fictionality. It's like a novelist who has forgotten that he's writing a novel and takes his inventions for historiography.

Author: And how do I deal with that?

Eco: How?

Author: Well. I check. But not everything. Only what's crucial for the plot or credibility. If the AI tells me that telephones already existed in 1860, and the plot depends on it, I must look it up. If it's just a background detail, I can leave it—or I can use it consciously. A productive hallucination can be a portal to magical realism.

Eco: (laughs loudly, notes: "productive hallucination → magical realism") You transform the machine's error into an aesthetic principle! I like that. It reminds me of the medieval copyists who made mistakes while transcribing—and sometimes this created new meanings more interesting than the original. Semiotics calls this "creative misinterpretation"—the interpretant deviates from the intended sign and generates new semiosis.

Speed and Danger

Author: But there's a problem that concerns me.

Eco: (becomes attentive) Tell me.

Author: Speed. In the library I must select books, read them, digest them. That's slow—but this slowness generates reflection. The AI delivers in seconds. Within an hour I can accumulate more world knowledge than I could have gathered in a month before. But this knowledge... it's undigested.

Eco: (writes: "Speed vs. digestion") It lies on the surface without sinking into depth.

Author: Yes. And worse still: The AI closes gaps that would be productive. If I don't know exactly what a medieval daily schedule in the monastery was like, I must invent—and in this invention lies freedom. But the AI delivers the complete timetable. The gap is closed. The space for imagination too.

Eco: (nods slowly, notes: "closed gap = lost freedom") That's a deep insight. When I wrote *The Name of the Rose*, I sometimes had to work from memory, sometimes guess. And precisely these gaps let the text breathe. Had I had total access—or your AI—the novel might have been more correct, but also more suffocating. In semiotic terms: The gap is a blank space that forces the reader—and the author!—to interpret. A complete encyclopedia permits no interpretation.

Author: (writes: "blank space as productive incompleteness") That's why I must learn to consciously not ask the AI. Actively cultivate ignorance.

Eco: That requires discipline—the discipline of refusal.

Author: (nods) Discipline is my element. But the temptation is real.

The Strategy of Curation

Author: The romantic genius concept has always filled me with aversion. Those who, like me, curate from possibilities need above all theoretical equipment. My resource for this is the literary-scholarly tradition from Aristotle to today. Without the conviction that writing is teachable and learnable, I couldn't use the AI. Because what I cannot systematize, I also cannot demand from a machine.

Eco: (nods, writes: "Anti-genius = Pro-system") That's a radical position—and one usually foreign to German literature studies. Most literary scholars analyze what others have written, but they don't believe one can derive a curriculum for writing from it. They see the literary-theoretical tradition as an interpretive tool, not as a production tool.

Author: That was exactly my problem with my studies. Theory remained sterile.

Eco: But you've made it productive. (smiles) Show me a concrete example of your curation.

Author: (leafs through her notebook) Let's say I'm writing a scene in a Parisian café, 1920s. I ask the AI: "Describe the atmosphere." It delivers a scene—cigarette smoke, the clatter of cups, conversations about surrealism. That's... okay. But it's generic.

Eco: The average of a thousand texts.

Author: Exactly. So I ask more specifically: "What did a penniless artist drink when he had no money for coffee?" The AI might say: "A glass of water he sipped for hours." Better. Then: "Was there a certain seating arrangement? Where did the successful sit, where the failures?"

Eco: (nods enthusiastically, notes: "iterative prompting") You drill deeper. You use the AI as a research assistant who provides hypotheses. Semiotically speaking: You perform an abduction—you suspect a rule and test it. Charles Sanders Peirce would appreciate that.

Author: (writes: "Abduction - Peirce") And then I don't check whether it's true—I check whether it works. Whether it serves my character, whether it sharpens the scene. If the AI tells me the failures sat in the corner next to the toilet, and that's a hallucination—I keep it anyway, because it tells a truth about social shame.

Eco: (underlines multiple times) You use the machine's lie to reach a higher truth. That's sophisticated—in the best sense. But tell me: How do you prevent the machine from leading you instead of you leading the machine?

Author: By confronting it with tradition. When I tell it: "Write me a scene in a hospital, but use Foucault's concept of the panopticon—show how architecture makes power relations between doctor and patient visible"—then it's much easier for me to let the AI make this attempt and then trim its output than to implement Foucault's concept from scratch myself. I gain time to concentrate on my actual work.

Eco: (thoughtfully) But does the machine really know Foucault? Or does it only know how people have written about Foucault?

Author: The latter. That's why I must have read the primary texts. Not to instruct the AI, but to recognize its errors. The AI might tell me: "Foucault emphasized total surveillance." And I must know: No, Foucault emphasized internalized surveillance—the fear of being observed even when no one is watching.

Eco: (nods enthusiastically, writes extensively) You curate not only the literary form but also the knowledge itself. As a semiotician I would say: The AI reproduces signs, but it doesn't understand the sign systems. It sees the surface of meaning, not its deep structure. You're the one who brings back depth. The machine operates on the level of manifestation—the visible surface. You operate on the level of immanent structure—the underlying system.

Author: (writes enthusiastically: "Manifestation vs. immanent structure") Exactly. Studying German literature taught me to analyze texts. Empirical literary studies taught me to see through systems. But neither taught me to write. The AI... the AI has now shown me a way. Not because it writes well, but because it delivers raw material I can work with using my entire analytical competence.

Eco: You transform criticism into creation. That's dialectical. Or semiotically expressed: You transform the meta-language of analysis into the object-language of production.

The Question of Voice

Eco: (becomes quiet) But let's get to the real question. In an interview you said your central concern is finding your own voice. Not the AI's voice, not the voice of tradition—your voice. How does that work?

Author: (sets down the coffee cup) That's the most difficult question. The AI delivers sentences that work—grammatically correct, rhythmically balanced, semantically precise. But they have a certain smoothness. A predictability. I experiment with breaking this smoothness.

Eco: How?

Author: The AI tends toward harmony. Perfect syntax, balanced sentence lengths, elegant metaphors. When I adopt and revise a text from it, I deliberately insert disturbances—a repetition, an asymmetry, an expression that's too colloquial or too stilted for the context.

Eco: (smiles, notes: "Sabotage of perfection") You sabotage perfection.

Author: Yes. But here's the problem: How do I know this sabotage is my voice and not just a reaction against the machine? Am I defining myself only *ex negativo*?

Eco: (nods slowly) You're asking whether your voice still has a positive quality or is only a negation. But I would say: You're asking the wrong question. Voice isn't a mystical essence dwelling within you threatened by the AI. Voice is the sum of your decisions. Which word do you choose when three are possible? Where do you place the period, where the comma? Semiotically speaking: Your voice is your individual code—your personal system of preferences and exclusions.

Author: (writes: "Voice = individual code") The AI answers these questions based on probability. But I... I have obsessions. Themes that won't let me go. The AI has no obsessions.

Eco: (underlines "obsessions") Exactly! The AI can write about loneliness—competently, technically correct. But you know something about loneliness the AI doesn't know. Because you've lived it. This knowledge—not as concept but as texture, as sensory memory—that's your voice.

Author: But what if the AI distills this knowledge from thousands of texts by other people and returns a version to me that's more convincing than my own memory?

Eco: (laughs softly) Then you have the problem of every author since Homer's time. The fear that tradition is more eloquent than oneself. That's not new. Only faster and... more seductive. The AI disguises tradition as a personal offer.

Author: (nods) That's why the seven competencies. They force me to question every AI output: Is the world knowledge correct? Does the dramaturgy work? Is the psychology consistent? The machine wants me simply to accept. The competencies enforce resistance.

Eco: (nods enthusiastically, notes: "Competencies as resistance filter") And in this resistance your voice emerges. As a semiotician I would say: The AI is a sign generator. But signs without intention are empty. You're the one who adds intention—the illocutionary force, as Searle would say. The seven competencies are your testing mechanism—they ensure that every sign is not only plausible but meaningful.

Author: You mentioned erudition earlier. I've fought my whole life against the suspicion that studying German literature is useless. Now it turns out: It was the perfect preparation. Not for writing, but for curating the AI.

Eco: You transform analytical competence into creative competence. That's a new form of mastery. You don't create from nothing. You curate from too much.

Instantaneous World Creation

Eco: (leans back) Show me a concrete example of this world creation. What can the machine build in two minutes?

Author: (takes her notebook, leafs through it) I have an example prepared here. I asked the AI: "Describe a Venetian glassmaker's workshop in the late 16th century. Three generations work there. The grandfather is master, the father introduced the innovation that made the family rich, the grandson wants to break out. Show me the social dynamic, the spatial arrangement, the tools, the economic constraints."

Eco: (leans forward, writes: "Example: Venetian glass workshop") And?

Author: (reads aloud) "The workshop lies in a narrow building on the Fondamenta dei Vetrai on the island of Murano. On the ground floor stands the furnace, whose embers haven't been extinguished for three generations—extinction would bring misfortune. The grandfather, Michele, 67, with scarred hands, guards the old techniques: lattimo, the milky glass the Medici buy. His son Giorgio, 43, developed a new alloy ten years ago—a clearer glass that surpasses the competition from Bohemia. But the price was high: The ingredients are expensive, the error rate increased. Michele sees hybris in this. The grandson, Paolo, 19, has had enough of fire. He wants to become a painter, but the guild allows no exit—whoever knows the secret may not leave Murano. The three men work silently. Michele at the furnace, Giorgio at the table where he forms the mass, Paolo grinding—the lowest work, punishment for his rebellion. Over everything hangs the smell of charcoal, sweat, and the sweetish stench of lead in the glaze."

Eco: (is silent for a moment, notes extensively) That's impressive. In two minutes?

Author: In about thirty seconds.

Eco: (whistles softly) Madonna. What's correct about this description?

Author: The basic structure is correct. Murano was the center of Venetian glass art. The guild laws were strict. Lattimo is a real term. The social dynamic is plausible.

Eco: And what's not correct?

Author: (smiles) I don't know exactly. I'd have to look it up. Perhaps the lead glaze didn't exist that way. Perhaps "Fondamenta dei Vetrai" is invented.

Eco: But that's not the real problem, is it?

Author: (looks at him) No. What is the real problem?

Eco: (underlines several passages in his notes) The world is too new. It has no layers, no history. These three men exist only in this moment. But a real Venetian glassmaker family would have centuries of knowledge within it. The furnace that's been burning for three generations? Why three? Why not ten? The AI chooses a number that sounds dramatic—but it doesn't understand that every number has a story. Semiotically speaking: The AI delivers signs without memory. But real signs carry their history with them.

Author: (writes: "Signs without memory") The world is too consistent. Too clean.

Eco: (nods emphatically) Exactly. Real worlds are palimpsests. One sees traces of the past showing through. A medieval monastery was built on a Roman temple. A Venetian family still bears a Byzantine name because the great-great-grandfather married a Greek woman. The AI creates worlds that look as if they arose yesterday—without breaks, without contradictions.

Author: Because it only reproduces the probable. Not the idiosyncratic.

Eco: Right. And the idiosyncratic—the house that breaks ranks, the name that doesn't fit, the ritual whose origin has been forgotten—that's what makes an invented world real. In semiotics we would say: The AI delivers the norm. But literature arises in deviation from the norm.

Author: (writes: "Literature = deviation from norm") So what must I do?

Eco: Build in contradictions. Things that don't fit. The AI delivers the skeleton—but you must create the fractures. Perhaps the furnace actually was extinguished once, and the family guards the secret out of shame. Perhaps Paolo's rebellion is the echo of a great-great-uncle who also wanted to flee and failed. History isn't a line—it's a tangle.

Author: The AI smooths the tangle.

Eco: Always. Because it has no time. It knows 1580 and 1590 and 1600—but it doesn't understand how 1580 affects 1590. It stacks facts, but it doesn't understand how facts age, transform, contradict each other. It has no semiosis—no sign development over time.

Author: (notes: "no semiosis over time") But precisely this historylessness is also a relief. The AI builds me a world without resistance. I can start immediately. Then I must learn to fix this world—to accept it even when it's impractical. Use the speed, then slam the door shut: This is how it is now. Work with it.

Eco: (nods) Exactly. And then give this world time. Let it lie. A month. Two months. Read primary texts from the epoch. When you come back, you see where the AI world is too smooth. Then you roughen it up—with the contradictions from the primary texts.

Author: You transform my efficiency into depth.

Eco: The AI is efficient. But literature needs time—not as production time but as reflection time. The world must ripen within you.

The Labyrinth as Metaphor

Eco: (pushes the floor plan across the table) See this? That's my abbey. I drew it before I wrote a line. Every staircase, every corridor, every window.

Author: (examines the floor plan, makes notes) Because you wanted to live in it.

Eco: Not just that. Because I wanted it to force me. When my character goes from the scriptorium to the kitchen, she can't walk through walls. Architecture is resistance—and resistance generates narrative. If the corridor is too long, the character will see something along the way. If the staircase is too steep, she will stumble.

Author: The AI can also build me an architecture. In seconds.

Eco: But will this architecture force you? Or will it obey you?

Author: (sets down the cup) It will obey me. Because I can change it anytime. The AI has no architectural memory. It adapts to my wish.

Eco: (underlines multiple times) Then you lose resistance. And without resistance there is no truth. My abbey was uncomfortable. There were rooms that were too small, corridors too far apart. I could have changed it. But I didn't. Because this discomfort told me something about medieval life I hadn't planned.

Author: You let yourself be surprised.

Eco: Yes. And the AI doesn't surprise you. It confirms you. It says: "Here's a world that fits your story." But real worlds never fit perfectly. They're too old, too idiosyncratic, too real.

Author: (writes decisively) Then I set myself a limit. I ask the AI three times about this world. On the third time it's finished. After that it's sacrosanct. And if later a scene doesn't work because the architecture prevents it, then I change the scene, not the architecture.

Eco: (nods appreciatively, notes: "Three-question rule") Exactly. You know, the medieval monks who copied manuscripts couldn't simply delete. Every error remained visible—erased, overwritten, but

visible. That created honesty. The digital world—and your AI—permits endless revision. But endless revision creates characterlessness. A text needs scars.

Author: Scars: that's an excellent image. Not random errors. But structural contradictions. If my AI world has an inconsistency—a building that's architecturally questionable, a law that doesn't quite fit—and I only notice it when the novel is half finished, then I keep it. I write around it. I make it a secret.

Eco: (smiles) You improvise within your own constraints. The AI delivers the constraints—but you must take them seriously. Otherwise they're not constraints but only scenery.

The Farewell

Author: Signor Eco, you've given me something I didn't expect.

Eco: (smiles) What's that?

Author: Confirmation. That my model holds. That the seven competencies can work—if I apply them consistently.

Eco: (laughs softly) Don't let yourself be seduced. The AI is seductive because it gives you exactly what you want—immediately, perfectly formatted, plausible. But literature doesn't arise where you get what you want. It arises where the world refuses to obey you.

Author: But the AI always obeys.

Eco: Then you must drive the obedience out of it. Treat it like an overeager student. When it gives you a perfect answer, ask: "Good. But what if the opposite were true?" Force it to contradict. Let it build multiple versions of the same world—then choose the most uncomfortable.

Author: The most uncomfortable?

Eco: The one that gives you problems. The one that makes your story harder, not easier. Because there—in the difficulty—lies substance.

Author: (stands up, closes her notebook) I'll take that to heart.

Eco: (also stands up, extends his hand) Mia cara, one more thing: The AI can build you many worlds. But only you can decide which of them is habitable. Not for your characters—they're at your mercy. But for yourself. You must want to write in this world. If the world bores you, it will also bore your readers.

Author: (smiles) I'll remember that. Grazie, Maestro.

Eco: Prego. And remember: You've created a theoretical foundation for yourself—the seven competencies. That's more than most authors ever have. Use it. But also let yourself be surprised by your own model. The best models are those that teach us when we must break them.

Author: Arrivederci, Signor Eco.

Eco: Arrivederci. And when you next ask the AI, think of my abbey. It was uncomfortable, complicated, sometimes contradictory. But it was real—more real than any perfect building could have been.

The Author leaves the office. Eco looks at the floor plan of his abbey, then at his pages full of notes—containing terms like "signifier/signified," "paradigmatic/syntagmatic," "abduction," "signs without memory," "semiosis over time." He smiles and murmurs: "A machine that dreams... and a woman who builds a model to tame the dreams. This will be an interesting future."

The Transitional Space: Psychological Logic and the True Self

A Workshop Conversation with D.W. Winnicott

Winnicott's practice in Paddington, London, on an autumn afternoon in October 1970. A bright, friendly room on the ground floor of a Victorian house. Through large windows, mild light falls on bookshelves filled with psychoanalytic literature—Freud, Klein, Anna Freud, Jones. In one corner stands a low table with children's toys: a worn teddy bear, colorful building blocks, a soft blanket. Winnicott, 74 years old, with thinning white hair, sits relaxed in an armchair. Before him lies his clinical diary, open. As the Author enters the room, he waves to her in a friendly manner. She greets him and places a flat, metallic-gleaming object on the table.

Winnicott: (regards the device curiously) You've brought something with you. What is that? It looks like... a flat briefcase? But it has an unusual shape.

Author: That's difficult to explain, Dr. Winnicott. You will soon no longer be alive. I come from a time fifty years hence. Technologically, much has changed since then.

Winnicott: (leans forward, takes his diary, writes: "a time traveler?", then to her) Fascinating. Show me.

Author: (opens the laptop) This is a computer—a very small, portable one. A "laptop." In 1970 there are computers, but they fill entire rooms. In my time they fit in a bag. Computers are not just calculating machines. They are gateways to a worldwide network—the Internet. Billions of people are connected. One can write texts, send them, read them—in seconds, across continents.

Winnicott: (writes: "Worldwide network = collective unconscious?") A digital memory of the species. Remarkable. And you use this... Internet for your work?

Author: It's the raw substance. On the basis of these billions of texts, "Artificial Intelligences" have been created. More precisely: Large Language Models.

Winnicott: (looks up) A special form of artificial intelligence?

Psychological Logic

Author: Yes. While AI generally attempts to solve logical problems, LLMs specialize in imitating the structure of our language. They've been fed the entire Internet until they learned how we think, how we feel—or at least, how we write about it.

Winnicott: What can such a model do?

Author: If I tell it: "Write a scene in which Kurt, a 60-year-old man, cannot answer a woman"—then it produces text. It doesn't really understand what it's writing. It calculates probabilities. Which word most probably follows which. But the result can be astonishing. Sometimes frighteningly good.

Winnicott: (leans back, notes: "Machine writes—statistically, not randomly") A machine based on probabilities. So a kind of... statistical average of all human texts?

Author: Exactly. And therein lies the problem. It tends toward the middle. Toward harmony. Toward coherence. If I ask it to write an angry character, it gives me anger—but tamed, controlled, comprehensible. No raw, irrational fury. It smooths everything. It wants to please.

Winnicott: (underlines "please" in his diary) Please. Like a mother who tries too hard to satisfy the child—and thereby prevents the child from finding its own raw truth. (Pause) You work with this machine to... write against what?

Author: Against harmony. I'm developing a systematic framework for AI-assisted creative writing. At its center stand seven competencies: world knowledge, psychological logic, stylistics, dramaturgy, narratology, cultural references, poetics. The competency that concerns me most at the moment is the second: **psychological logic**. The ability to write characters who are psychologically truthful. Not coherent. Not pleasing. But true—with all their contradictions.

Winnicott: (nods, writes: "7 competencies—2. psychological logic") And the machine cannot do this?

Author: It cannot do it on its own. It gives me the smooth, the harmonious. I must curate its outputs to incorporate the rough, the contradictory. That's why I'm here. I hope that your concepts—the true self, the false self, the transitional space—can help me better understand this curation.

Winnicott: (smiles) Then let us begin. But first: You speak with this machine. You give it tasks, wait for answers, are sometimes surprised by what it produces. That doesn't sound like a simple tool. That sounds like a... relationship.

Author: (surprised) A relationship? With a machine?

Winnicott: (nods) In the sense that: There is a You, there is an I, and between us something Third emerges. I call this Third the transitional space. (Pause, writes: "Transitional space = transitional space") Are you familiar with the term?

Author: (notes: "Transitional space") I've heard of it. The space between inside and outside. Where children play.

Winnicott: (stands up, goes to the teddy bear, picks it up) Exactly. A child has a teddy bear. For the child, this bear is not "just a stuffed animal." But it is also not "alive" like the mother. It is both—and neither. The child projects life into the bear, but the bear also has objecthood—it is soft, it smells of something, it is there when the child needs it. This space—between "I create the bear" and "The bear exists independently of me"—is the transitional space. And in this space creativity emerges. (Pause, sits down) Tell me: When you work with the AI—who writes then? You? The machine?

Author: (thinks, notes: "Who writes?") Both. Or... neither. I give it a task, it answers, I change the answer, it responds to that, and eventually something emerges that is neither only from me nor only from it.

Winnicott: (nods enthusiastically, writes: "AI = transitional object") Exactly! That is the transitional space. The AI is not "you"—it has no intentions, no emotions, no unconscious. But it is also not completely "outside"—it reacts to you, it mirrors your language, it offers you material that resonates with your thinking. It exists in this intermediate space. And precisely therefore it is productive for creativity. Because creativity always takes place in the transitional space.

Author: (writes: "Transitional space as site of curation") That's a new thought for me.

The False Self of the AI

Winnicott: (sits down again) Tell me about a character. Concretely.

Author: Kurt. 60 years old, early-retired mechanic, lives alone on a North German Hallig—a tidal marsh island. He loves a woman—Maren. They knew each other as children, in a coastal town near this Hallig. Then she went away. To New York. She lived her own life, loves a woman named Sarah. But now, after decades, she writes to Kurt. Not because she loves him, but because he is the only one still living who knew her as a child. She offers him a renewal of contact. And Kurt... Kurt answers initially as well, but then falters and can no longer reply. He wants to. But he cannot.

Winnicott: (nods, writes: "Kurt—cannot answer") And the machine—what did it give you?

Author: A first version. But the version was too smooth. Too comprehensible. Kurt had clear reasons for his loneliness—a trauma in childhood, a failed marriage, a concrete injury. It was understandable. But it was wrong.

Winnicott: (interested) Why was it wrong?

Author: Because it was too simple. Because it made Kurt into a "case." Into someone one can understand if one only knows the backstory. But some people are hardened because... because they are. Not because of a trauma, but because they started hardening at some point and never stopped.

Winnicott: (nods slowly, writes: "Hardening without trauma") That is a deep insight. What you describe is what I call the false self. (Pause) Let me explain: A child learns to hide its true needs when the environment does not fulfill them. It develops a mask that pleases the outside world—the false self. This mask is an adaptive achievement. "If I am as mother needs me, I will be loved." But beneath lies the **true self**—the helpless, needy, aggressive. With Kurt, this mask has become so perfect that he himself no longer knows that something still exists beneath it. (Pause, looks at her) And here is the decisive point: Your machine, if you don't curate it, will always deliver the false self. Because the false self is coherent. It is the socially acceptable version of the person.

Author: (excited, notes: "AI = always false self") Yes! Exactly that! The AI wrote me a Kurt who functions. Who has reasons. Who can be understood. But I had to break open this false self. I had to show the cracks.

Winnicott: (smiles) And how did you do that?

The Cigarette as Regression

Author: (opens the laptop, shows him the text) There was a moment. Kurt has an accident, injures himself severely, is rescued by his neighbor Momme. Momme carries him. Piggyback. It is agonizingly intimate—Kurt smells Momme's sweat, feels his warmth. Momme wraps him in a blanket like a child. In the first version the AI wrote, Kurt thanks him at the end. He says: "Thanks, Momme." It was conciliatory. It was beautiful. But it was the false self.

Winnicott: (nods) The false self says "thanks" because that is the social norm. But what did the true self want?

Author: The true self could say nothing at all. It was overwhelmed. By the shame of having been carried. By the longing for the warmth. By the panic before intimacy. So I rewrote the scene. At the end, Momme rolls himself a cigarette. The smoke drifts to Kurt. Kurt turns away. He had been on the verge of opening himself. But in this moment—this tiny moment—he closes himself again. The cigarette is his pretext to return to the mask.

Winnicott: (looks at her for a long time, then quietly) That is the true self. Not the thanking. But the turning away. That is the truth. (Pause, writes: "Cigarette = pretext for regression") And the AI would never have given you that, because the AI has no concept of the true self. It understands only the false

self—the surface, the mask. Your task as curator is to look beneath the mask. To find the cracks. To make the hidden visible.

Author: (writes: "Make cracks in false self visible") The false self of AI characters. I must recognize when the AI shows me only the mask, and then ask: "What is beneath? What is this character hiding—from itself?"

Winnicott: (nods) Exactly. But let me go one step further. You said the cigarette was arbitrary. A small, ridiculous occasion for a great regression. Why did you choose something so banal?

Author: Because... because I thought it would be more precise. If Momme had struck Kurt, one could understand: "Of course Kurt withdraws." But a cigarette? That is so small, so unworthy. It shows that Kurt doesn't need a reason to turn away. He seeks only a pretext. Any pretext suffices.

Winnicott: (smiles, underlines "pretext") And that is exactly right. Do you know why? Because the false self always seeks pretexts. It needs justifications to protect the true self. The cigarette is not the reason for Kurt's regression. It is the permission for it. The false self says: "See? He smokes. That's disgusting. I may turn away." But in truth the true self has already decided: "I cannot bear this closeness. I must flee." The cigarette is only the language in which the false self can articulate this decision.

Author: (notes: "Arbitrariness = diagnosis, not error") Then the arbitrariness shows how thin the justifications are. How desperately the false self seeks pretexts.

Winnicott: (nods vigorously) Yes! And here lies the difference between you and your machine. The machine seeks proportionality—"If Kurt turns away, the reason must be large enough." But you know: With hardened people there is no proportionality. A word, a smell, a gesture—that suffices. Because it's never about the occasion. It's always about the structure.

No Introspection—Only Symptoms

Author: (notes: "No proportionality in hardening") But how do I curate that? Concretely. If the AI delivers me a scene in which Kurt turns away for a "good reason"—how do I recognize that I need a banal trigger?

Winnicott: (leans forward) That is a question of intuition. Not between Kurt and Momme. Between you and the character. Let me ask: Do you know people like Kurt? In your life?

Author: (nods slowly) Yes. Men who cannot speak. Who harden. Who experience every closeness as threat.

Winnicott: And when you think of these men—do they need large reasons to withdraw?

Author: (quietly) Small things. Always small things.

Winnicott: (nods, writes: "Intuition > probability") Then trust this knowledge. That is your intuition. The AI has no intuition. It has only probabilities. But you have lived. You have suffered. You have observed people. This embodied, non-propositional knowledge is your authority as curator. If the AI delivers you something that is "plausible" but feels "wrong," then trust the feeling. The feeling is often wiser than logic.

Author: (notes: "Intuition as curatorial authority") But there is something else. Maren—Kurt cannot answer her. He procrastinates. "Tomorrow I'll find the right words." But tomorrow never comes. The AI wants to help him. It wants him to find the right words. It wants a solution. How do I show that procrastination itself is the solution?

Winnicott: (nods understandingly) Procrastination is not weakness. It is strategy. As long as he says "tomorrow," he can tell himself he's trying. But he's not trying. He's avoiding. (Pause) And how did you portray that?

Author: I asked the AI to write a scene in which Kurt begins to answer Maren. "Maren," he types. Then he stops. The AI wrote further: "He considered what he should say." But that was explanation. I wanted no explanation. So I asked the AI to try again, but without thoughts. Only action. Kurt types "Maren,". Stares at the word. Deletes it. Closes the laptop. That was all. No comment. No introspection.

Winnicott: (nods appreciatively, writes: "No introspection—only symptoms") That is excellent. You removed introspection. You showed the symptom without explaining it. And that is exactly right. For if Kurt himself understands why he cannot write, the scene loses its power. The unconscious must remain unconscious—even for the character. (Pause) I once had a boy in treatment—let's call him Peter, eight years old. He never spoke about his feelings. But he played. With building blocks. And one day he built a wall around himself. Then he sat behind it, silent. That was his true self speaking. Not in words. In action. Just like your Kurt.

Author: (notes: "Clinical example—Peter builds wall") So: Show, don't explain.

Winnicott: Yes. Symptoms, not introspection. That is a tool.

Dostoevsky and Kafka

Winnicott: (leans back) In an interview I read that you started reading Dostoevsky at 16. "The Possessed" was your first great impression. Why, do you think?

Author: Because his characters are so torn. So contradictory. Stavrogin is simultaneously fascinating and repulsive. One doesn't understand him. But one feels him.

Winnicott: (nods, writes: "Dostoevsky = opacity") Exactly. Dostoevsky shows the true self—the chaotic, the contradictory, the incomprehensible. And that is what you must do too. The AI will always give you

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the false self—the coherent, comprehensible version. Your task is to expose the true self. To show the contradictions. To defend the incomprehensibility.

Author: (quietly) But that is difficult. Because I also want to understand. I want to know why Kurt is as he is. I want his biography. His reasons.

Winnicott: (serious) Of course you want that. We all want to understand. But sometimes understanding is a defense against feeling. If you understand Kurt, you can control him. You can put him in a drawer: "Ah, he has a trauma." But if he remains opaque—if he remains incomprehensible—then you must feel him. And that is much more difficult. But also much truer.

Author: (after a long pause, notes: "Defend opacity against AI transparency") Then my task is to defend opacity. Against the AI, which wants to make everything transparent. Against myself, who wants to understand everything.

Winnicott: (nods) Yes. But let me say something: Opacity is not always the answer. Think of Kafka. (Pause) With Kafka we see something completely different. Gregor Samsa becomes a beetle—but he has no psychology in the Dostoevskian sense. He has only function. He is the false self that has become so perfect that the true self no longer exists. Or has been obliterated. The Castle, The Trial—these are worlds that no longer permit a true self. Only system. Adaptation. Ritual. (Pause) The AI is Kafka.

Author: (breathes deeply, notes: "AI = Kafka") You mean...

Winnicott: The AI is the perfect false self. It knows only function, adaptation, coherence. If you let it, it writes you Gregor Samsa—but without the horror. Without the suffocation. Only the smooth surface. It writes The Castle without the Kafkaesque despair. Your task is to be Dostoevsky. To implant the true self. The torment. The opaque. The struggle.

Author: But then Kurt is a riddle. He is Dostoevsky—opaque, contradictory, torn. But he has chosen a world that protects his false self. The Hallig is not a Kafka system, but it functions like one: It makes relationships structurally impossible. The barrenness of the landscape mirrors the barrenness of his soul. He has retreated into a world that permits no intimacy.

Winnicott: Exactly. The Hallig is not Kafkaesque—it is natural, not bureaucratic. But Kurt has made it into his Kafka. He uses the geographic isolation to justify the psychological. "I am alone because I live on a Hallig"—that is the false self justifying itself. The truth is: He lives on the Hallig because he wants to be alone.

Good Enough Collaborator

Winnicott: (Pause, looks at the Author) And you recognized that—against the tendency of your machine, which would have wanted to 'save' Kurt. (looks at the laptop) That shows me something: The AI is not your tool. It is your play partner.

Author: A play partner?

Winnicott: (smiles broadly) Yes! But not perfect—and that is important. Do you know why?

Author: Why?

Winnicott: (leans back, writes: "Good enough mother → good enough collaborator") Because a perfect partner enables no creativity. I have developed a concept I call the good enough mother. She fulfills most of the child's needs—but not all. She leaves small gaps, small frustrations. And in these gaps the child develops its own creativity. The mother who is perfect—who anticipates every need—suffocates the child. (Pause) The AI is a good enough collaborator. It gives you material, structure, mirroring. But it is not perfect. It makes errors. It produces clichés. It does not understand the true self. And precisely this imperfection is productive. Because you are forced to intervene. To curate. To correct. If the AI were perfect, you would no longer need to be an author.

Author: (notes: "Imperfection as productive force") The limits are not weakness. They are the frame.

Winnicott: (nods) Exactly. The AI is also a holding environment. (Pause, explains) A holding environment is a space that gives security, but also freedom. Like a mother who holds the child but does not hold it tight. The AI gives you structure and reliability, but it forces you to nothing. It answers when you ask, but it does not press. In this frame—between structure and freedom—you can become creative.

Author: (thoughtful) But sometimes it feels like a fight. The AI wants harmony, I want breaks. I reject its suggestions brutally.

Winnicott: (leans forward) Brutally. Let me tell you something about aggressive play—one of my central concepts. A child hits its teddy bear, throws it against the wall, pulls on its ears. Why? It tests: Does the teddy survive my aggression? If the teddy is still there the next day—not broken, not vanished—then the child learns: I can be destructive, and the world remains intact. That is the foundation for creativity. One must be able to destroy in order to create anew.

Author: (notes: "Aggressive play = test of survival")

Winnicott: But with people, aggressive play is dangerous. If I ask a colleague to write something, and I then say: "That's wrong, do it differently"—the relationship is damaged. Human relationships are fragile. Aggression endangers them. Therefore we must be careful, diplomatic. But that inhibits creativity. (Pause, looks at the laptop) And here lies the unique value of your AI. It is robust. It survives

your aggression, is there the next day, not offended. That makes it an ideal play partner for creative work.

Author: (writes: "AI = robust transitional object") Then robustness is structurally necessary.

Winnicott: Yes! Curatorial work must be destructive. You must be able to destroy the AI's suggestions in order to create something new from them. With a human you could not do that. The AI permits radical rejection without relationship costs.

Author: But if I become too accustomed to rejecting without consideration...

Winnicott: (serious) ...you could transfer this attitude to people. That is the danger. The AI is a practice space for creative destruction. But only with the AI. With people you must be different. That is the difference between play and reality.

Author: (notes: "Aggressive play only in transitional space")

The Door Remains Open

Winnicott: (stands up, goes to the window) Let me tell you one last thing. You asked me what I can tell you about Kurt—a 60-year-old man on a Hallig. And I told you: He is still the child who was not held. But let me be more precise: Kurt is not irreparable. He is hardened, yes. But hardening is defense. And defense can—sometimes, rarely—be broken open. Not through insight. Not through reason. But through experience. Through an encounter so overwhelming that the defense fails.

Author: You mean the scene with Momme?

Winnicott: (nods, writes: "Being held = defense breaks") Yes. When Momme carries Kurt, Kurt experiences something he has avoided his entire life: being held. In the truest sense. And for one moment—only one moment—the false self collapses. The true self becomes visible. The helpless, needy child. But then—then it is too much. Fear overwhelms him. So he rebuilds the wall. The cigarette is the first stone.

Author: (quietly, notes: "Cigarette = first stone of new wall") Then the cigarette was not only regression. It was rescue. Kurt rescues himself—from intimacy.

Winnicott: (turns, looks at her) Exactly. And that is the tragedy. The true self wants to live. But the false self is so strong, so perfect, that it suffocates the true self—in the name of protection. Kurt protects himself to death. (Pause) And that is the truth you must show. Not through explanation. But through portrayal. The wound needs time. One must not heal it too quickly.

Author: (stands up as well, notes: "Grief needs duration") I think I understand now. The AI gives me the material. But I must recognize the structure. The true self beneath the mask. The defense disguised as

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protection. The opacity that is the truth. And I must know: When do I write Dostoevsky, when do I write Kafka? When do I show the struggle of the true self, when do I show obliteration by the world?

Winnicott: (nods) And above all: You must play. With the AI. With the possibilities. With the words. Play is not frivolity. Play is the most serious form of creativity. In play, truths emerge that one could never find through analysis.

Author: (takes the laptop) Then I'll go back now to play. To the transitional space.

Winnicott: (smiles, closes his diary) Good. And if you doubt—if you think the AI dominates you or that you're losing control—remember: You are not the machine. But you are also not against the machine. You are **with** the machine. In the transitional space. And in this space—in this space between I and Not-I, between inside and outside—everything important emerges. All creativity. All art. All life.

Author: (at the door, turns once more) Thank you, Dr. Winnicott. For the holding. For the space.

Winnicott: (nods) Come back if you wish. Anytime. The space is always there. (smiles, points to the teddy bear) And so is the teddy.

The Art of Deviation: Stylistics in AI-Assisted Writing

A Workshop Conversation with Erich Auerbach

A bright study in New Haven, Connecticut. Autumn 1956. Through the windows, one sees the autumnal trees of the Yale campus. Auerbach sits at his desk, surrounded by books and manuscripts. Before him lies a rare edition of Vico. The Author has brought a bag in which her laptop still rests.

Auerbach: Dear colleague. That we should meet again here, in the shadow of these neo-Gothic stone walls. I remember fondly the view of the Bosphorus that I was able to enjoy with you five years ago, during our first conversation.

Author: Professor, to see you again is a genuine joy. And it relieves me to see that you are no longer dependent here on sheer memory. (gestures to the Vico) No more improvisations born of necessity. Finally the philological abundance you need for your work.

Auerbach: Memory was indeed my only anchor, yet it also forced me toward radical synthesis. You, however, spoke then of an entirely different foundation—your "seven competencies" and a technical methodology that you only hinted at. How far have you come with this systematic approach?

Author: I have begun to work out the competencies individually, and I am currently deep in stylistics. The experience of three millennia shows us that style is not mere ornament, but the tool by which we first make reality graspable—precisely the theme of your Mimesis book. (She takes the laptop and a notepad from her bag and places both among the manuscripts.) That is why I need your counsel.

Auerbach: (examines the laptop with curiosity) You wrote to me in your last letter that you wish to speak about a new form of writing. And you have brought... this. What is it? Some kind of automated typewriter?

Author: Far more than that. May I? (She opens the laptop; the light of the display falls on the book spines on the shelf.) We call it a laptop. In your time, computers still filled entire halls and served only for calculation. Today they are pocket-sized, providing access to the entirety of the world's digitized knowledge.

Auerbach: (leans forward, fascinated) All knowledge? In this flat case?

Author: It is access to a global network. On the basis of nearly everything ever written, systems have been developed—so-called Large Language Models, a form of artificial intelligence. One trains a machine statistically by having it read billions of texts. The machine learns: Which word probably follows which? Which sentence patterns are typical? If I now give it a task—"Write a scene in which a man is left by his wife"—it generates a text in seconds. It doesn't really "understand" what it writes. It calculates probabilities.

Auerbach: (leans back) A machine, an artificial intelligence, that writes. Based on statistical probabilities. It has read all of literary history—Homer, Dante, Shakespeare?

Author: Yes. The AI can imitate any style. Hemingway, Proust, Thomas Mann. But—and this is decisive—it has no style of its own. It is the perfect pastiche.

Auerbach: Pastiche... a technically perfect imitation without an original. A mask without a face.

Author: Exactly. The machine produces a kind of "norm-prose"—smooth, pleasing, but without a point of departure. In Mimesis you showed how literature captures reality through breaks and shadows. I fear this technology creates a world without shadows, because it only simulates the statistical average.

Auerbach: (after a pause) That sounds like a threat. Or a temptation. Show me what this machine produces.

The Zero Style of AI

Author: (types on the laptop) Here is my example: A man in his mid-fifties is left by his wife. I give the AI this task: "Write a scene in which Armin learns that his wife is leaving him." (She turns the screen toward Auerbach.)

Auerbach: (reads slowly aloud) "The evening sky glowed in a deep purple as Iris told him she would go. Armin felt his heart contract. The words hit him like a blow. Everything he had lived for shattered in that moment." (Pause) This is grammatically flawless. But it is dead.

Author: Yes. Do you know the French theorist Roland Barthes? Three years ago he published *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*. This here is what Barthes calls the "zero degree of literature." A mode of writing that attempts to be neutral. No ideology, no pathos, only the bare facts. Barthes called it *écriture blanche*, white writing. His example was Camus' *The Stranger*.

Auerbach: (notes: "Barthes. Zero degree. *Écriture blanche*.") Interesting. But I see the difference. Camus' zero style was an existential choice—Meursault cannot speak otherwise because the world appears meaningless to him. The form mirrors the content. Here, however...

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Author: ...here it is only automatism. Barthes recognized that neutrality is an illusion. As soon as it becomes method, it hardens into manner. The AI is the perfection of this paradox: it delivers zero style as automatism. This is your "leveling mimesis"—a world in which everything has been leveled to the same uniformity.

Auerbach: You mean the text is a façade behind which no space lies. This is not mimesis. This is a simulation of mimesis. An echo without origin. (Pause, notes: "AI = echo without origin")

Author: And here begins my work as curator. I must not merely correct this text—I must break it. In working with AI, I proceed iteratively, in cycles. First iteration: I tell the machine to rewrite the scene, but without metaphors, without "glowing skies." Only what happens.

(She types, the machine responds in seconds. She shows Auerbach the screen.)

Auerbach: (reads aloud) "Iris said: 'I'm leaving.' Armin sat at the table. He said nothing. After a minute he stood up and left the room." (surprised) This is better. Why?

Author: Because it no longer explains. "His heart contracted"—that is psychologization. The machine wants to be helpful, it wants to explain everything to the reader. But good literature does not explain. It shows. It leaves gaps.

Auerbach: Show, don't tell. But it is more than that. You remove the commentary. You let the action speak for itself. (Pause, notes: "No psychologization—only action") This reminds me of the Old Testament—those passages where God is silent and the reader remains in darkness. Think of the sacrifice of Isaac. "Take Isaac, your only son, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him." No commentary. No "Abraham was horrified" or "his heart tore." Only: "So Abraham rose early in the morning." The gap between word and meaning—that is the source of effect.

Author: (notes: "OT technique: gap between word and meaning") Exactly. But the AI hates this gap. It wants to illuminate everything. Therefore I must force it: "No introspection. Only action." And yet... (hesitates) the text is still empty.

Auerbach: (leans forward) Why?

The Point of Departure

Author: Because it lacks the point of departure. Your concept from Mimesis. Armin has no historical location, no social situation. He is a name, a function. "Man is left." That is all. But people are not abstract. They are always concrete, historical, situated.

Auerbach: (nods emphatically, notes: "Point of departure = historical location") Exactly! In Mimesis I tried to show that style is always a decision about social reality. Let me be precise: In Homer, a shield is

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not merely "a shield." It is described—the five layers of bronze, the engravings, the scenes from life. Everything is foreground, illuminated. The object has dignity through its visibility. In the Old Testament, however: "Abraham took the wood." What wood? How much? What did it look like? We do not know. The wood has meaning not through visibility but through backgroundedness—it is the wood for his son's funeral pyre.

Author: (writes: "Homer = foreground / OT = background")

Auerbach: And in modernity—in Balzac, in Flaubert—an object is no longer merely thing or symbol. It is social index. When Balzac describes a bankruptcy, it is not merely a psychological event—it is a social catastrophe, embedded in commercial law, concepts of honor, class dynamics. Père Goriot does not simply die—he dies abandoned, because his daughters regard him as social ballast. The poverty of the death chamber, the shabby furniture—these are not decorations. This is the social point of departure. Where is this point of departure in your Armin?

Author: It is missing. Therefore now a second iteration. I give the machine additional information: Armin is a teacher at a provincial gymnasium in West Germany, early 1960s. Iris is leaving him because she wants to go to Frankfurt—to the big city, perhaps to study, to lead a different life. Not because of another man, but because of freedom. Armin remains behind, not out of conviction, but out of inertia, out of fear of change.

(She types, the machine generates anew in seconds.)

Author: "Iris said: 'I'm going to Frankfurt.' Armin understood immediately. To Frankfurt—that was not a visit, that was flight. He sat at the kitchen table, before him a cup of cold coffee. The tablecloth had stains that Iris had always wanted to remove. Now no one would remove these stains anymore. He said nothing. After a minute he stood up and went to his study. There lay students' papers he had to correct."

Auerbach: (leans back, breathes deeply) Now it is literature.

Author: What has changed?

Auerbach: (notes: "Province vs. metropolis = social index") Everything. The point of departure is there. "To Frankfurt"—that is not merely a directional indication, that is a social judgment. Province against metropolis, the old life against the new. The economic miracle, the beginning student movement—all this resonates. And then these students' papers... Armin is not just any man. He is a civil servant, part of a system that promises stability. His wife is not only leaving him—she is leaving this system.

Details and the Reality Effect

Author: And the stains on the tablecloth?

Auerbach: (animated) Ah! Let me tell you something about Flaubert. In *Madame Bovary* he describes a barometer on the wall of Emma Bovary's living room. This barometer has no function for the plot. No one reads it, it influences nothing. But precisely for this reason it creates graspability. It says: "I am here because the world is this way. Not because the author needs me."

Author: That is exactly what Barthes will later call the *effet de réel*—the "reality effect" I told you about earlier. These apparently functionless details create density, they anchor fiction in the materiality of the world.

Auerbach: (nods) Ah, yes! Barthes' concept from the future. Let me make this more precise: The stains are even better than Flaubert's barometer, because they have a double function. First: They create this reality effect—"This kitchen really exists." Second: They have thematic resonance. Iris tried to create order. She failed. And now, as she leaves, no one will attempt this order anymore. The stains are stagnation, capitulation.

Author: It was the machine that invented these stains.

Auerbach: And you kept them. Why?

Author: Because they fulfill the *aptum*—the appropriateness that classical rhetoric taught.

Auerbach: (notes: "Aptum = appropriateness of detail and situation") Exactly. Cicero said: Every word, every detail must be appropriate to the object, the person, the situation. The detail fits the psychic and social situation. The machine delivered material to you, but you decided: This detail stays. Another you would have cut. That is your curatorial achievement.

Author: But how do I recognize which detail stays and which is merely "data garbage"? The AI floods the text with details.

Auerbach: (leans forward) That is a question of resonance. You must sense which detail resonates with the overall structure of the text. Let me give you a diagnostic tool: A detail is not data garbage if it touches at least two thematic lines. (Notes: "2-line criterion for details") The stain touches first Iris' attempt at order and second Armin's staying behind. The cold coffee touches first "frozen time" and second "refused care"—no one has warmed the coffee, no one cares. If a detail touches only one line, check whether it is really necessary. If it touches no line—cut it.

Author: (notes eagerly: "Detail must touch 2 thematic lines") That is a practical criterion.

Auerbach: But do not forget: You must set the structure. The machine can deliver details, but the thematic architecture—stagnation, order, capitulation—that is your decision. Without this architecture you cannot judge which details resonate.

Syntactic Arrhythmia

Author: The structure alone is not enough. There is still a problem. (types) See: "He went to his study. There lay students' papers." This is correct. But it is too smooth. As if Armin still functions. But a man whose wife has just left him—he no longer functions so smoothly.

Auerbach: (notes: "Smooth syntax = false self") You seek the break. The arrhythmia.

Author: Yes. Third iteration. I tell the machine: "Destroy the syntactic order. Let Armin's thoughts stumble."

(She types. The machine delivers in seconds.)

Author: "He sat down. Wanted to sit down. Stood up again. The students' papers. Must be corrected. Always these papers. Iris would have. No. He took the pen. Red. The pen. His hand."

Auerbach: (furrows his brow) This seems broken. But is it not too demonstrative? Too artificial? (Pause) Let me tell you something about Virginia Woolf. In Mrs Dalloway she has Clarissa think: "She would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or were that." The syntax breaks—"were this or were that"—because Clarissa's thought breaks. But Woolf doses these breaks. She alternates between ordered passages and fragmented ones. With you here, everything is only fragment. This is not stream of consciousness—this is chaos.

Author: You are right. The AI exaggerates when you tell it to destroy order. Therefore a fourth iteration. I mix: Some sentences remain smooth, others break. Thus emerges the rhythm of control and loss of control.

(She works, shows him the result.)

Author: "He sat down at the desk. The students' papers lay where he had put them. Thirty notebooks, all with the same green cover. He took the top one, opened it. Essay on Goethe's Werther. He read: 'Werther loved Lotte, but she could not...' He read no further. Stood up. Sat down again. The pen lay on the table. He did not take it."

Auerbach: (nods, notes: "Balance: control ↔ loss of control") Now it is right. The first sentences are calm, ordered—Armin still tries to maintain the routine. But then: "He read no further." A break. And the repetition: "Stood up. Sat down again." This is the inner unrest expressing itself in movement. And at the end: "He did not take it." A refusal. The collapse of function.

Stilistics

Author: This is what a structuralist named Jean Cohen will call the *écart* in the 1960s—the deviation from the norm. Cohen will say: Poetry is the structured violation of the linguistic norm. Without this deviation, the text remains dead. The AI wants to maintain the norm. I must command it to err—but dosed, controlled.

Auerbach: (notes: "Écart = structured deviation") That sounds like a radicalization of what Leo Spitzer called the "linguistic click." Spitzer searched for those small shifts that reveal an author's psychic structure. You must create it artificially, through instructions to the machine. The paradox: You use erudition—from ancient rhetoric to Cohen—to prevent a machine from sounding mechanical.

Author: Exactly. Style is the trace of a body in language. The machine has no body—but I can lend it mine. In every chosen word. The AI delivers the score of possibilities, but the phrasing is my breath.

The False Self in Language

Auerbach: Let me ask something else. I have read what you discussed with Dr. Winnicott about psychological logic. The concept of the "false self"—the mask that has perfected itself so much that it suffocates the true person. You said the AI always delivers the false self because it is coherent, socially acceptable. How does this relate to stylistics?

Author: Directly! The false self speaks in perfect sentences. It explains itself. It is polite. If Armin said: "Iris, I understand your decision, even though it pains me"—that would be false self. But the true self cannot speak. It stumbles, breaks off, falls silent. Therefore I must break the syntax—to make the true self audible.

Auerbach: (notes: "Syntax break = symptom of true self") Style as symptom of the psyche. But also conversely: Style forms the psyche. If you let Armin speak in smooth sentences, he becomes a façade. If you let him stumble, he becomes human. (Pause) This reminds me of Montaigne. Montaigne wrote: "Je ne peins pas l'être, je peins le passage." I do not paint being, I paint passage. His *Essais* are full of syntactic breaks, insertions, corrections—because he does not want to present a finished truth, but the process of thinking itself. The form is the content.

Author: (notes: "Montaigne: form = process of thinking")

Auerbach: So stylistics and psychological logic are inseparable. But tell me: How do you distinguish stylistics from the other competencies? From dramaturgy, for example?

Author: A dramaturgical climax demands a stylistic break. When Iris says "I'm leaving," the rhythm of language must change—from flowing to choppy. Otherwise the climax remains unmarked. Dramaturgy determines where the climax lies. Stylistics determines how it manifests linguistically.

Auerbach: And with narratology? With the question of who narrates, from what perspective?

Stilistics

Author: There too. If I narrate Armin from the first-person perspective, his style must mirror his self-perception. If I narrate him from a distance, the style can be more ironic, cooler. The AI has difficulty with this calibration. It narrates "neutrally"—but neutrality does not exist. Every narrative perspective has a style.

Auerbach: And how do you distinguish stylistics from poetics? Both deal with the question of form.

Author: (notes: "Stylistics vs. poetics") Stylistics is the how—the concrete linguistic decisions. Sentence length, metaphors, rhythm. Poetics is the why—the aesthetic responsibility. Should this text please or disturb? Should it be hermetic or accessible? Poetics gives the direction, stylistics implements it.

Auerbach: So: Poetics is strategy, stylistics is tactics.

Author: Exactly.

Division of Labor: From Craft to Mastery

Auerbach: Let us speak about the practical division of labor. What exactly does the machine take over, what remains with you?

Author: The machine takes over the drudgework. Synonym searches, consistency checks, syntactic smoothing. I used to spend 70% of my time on this—today it is done in seconds. I concentrate on analysis: Which detail resonates? Where must syntax break? This is not less work, but different work. I have not become lazier—I have become a curator. Previously I was producer and judge in one. Now I am only judge—but that requires sharpened attention.

Auerbach: (notes: "From craft to mastery") A shift from craft to mastery. The craftsman produces, the master judges. But how do you know that you are not becoming too dependent? That you do not lose the ability for direct production?

Author: A writer who switched from pen to typewriter did not lose the ability to write by hand. He chose a different tool. The AI is my medium. I could still write every sentence by hand—but why should I, when the machine delivers a hundred variants from which I can choose?

Auerbach: (shakes his head) No. Forgive me, but that is not the same. The typewriter does not take formulation from you. You must still form every sentence yourself, word by word. The AI, however, formulates. You only choose. That is a fundamental shift. (Pause) And I fear you deceive yourself when you say you could "still write every sentence by hand." You can only do so as long as you do it. Whoever only chooses unlearns forming. Like a musician who only conducts but no longer plays—eventually he loses the feeling for the instrument.

Author: (hesitates) That is a serious warning.

Auerbach: I am not saying you should not use the AI. I am saying: Write without it as well. Regularly. Otherwise you become dependent—not on the machine as tool, but on its preliminary work. And then your curation is no longer free. You only choose from what the machine offers you, instead of forming yourself.

Author: (notes: "Warning: maintain ability to form through training") You are right. I must train both muscles—forming and choosing. (Pause, raises her gaze) But let me say something: If I do it correctly—if I bring the erudition, if I maintain the ability to form, if I set the thematic architecture myself—then the AI is not my prosthesis. Then it is my magnifying glass. It shows me details I would have overlooked. It produces variants that sharpen my judgment. It forces me to name precisely what works and what does not. This is not loss—this is an expansion of possibilities. Provided I remain vigilant.

The Danger of Pseudo-Classicism

Auerbach: (after a pause, stands, steps to the window) Provided you remain vigilant. That is the decisive point. But I must tell you something. When I look at these texts—these smooth, correct sentences your machine produces—it reminds me of something I greatly fear: pseudo-classicism. Do you know the term?

Author: Explain it to me.

Auerbach: (notes: "Pseudo-classicism = style as ornament, not as insight") In the 19th century there was a wave of historical novels that presented themselves as "classical"—elegant prose, harmonious periods, beautiful metaphors. Think of Felix Dahn's *A Struggle for Rome* or the academic poetry of late Romanticism. Gustav Freytag's *The Ancestors*, Wilhelm Jordan's *Nibelunge*—everything was smooth, everything was educated. They imitated classical stylistic devices—chiasmus, parallelism, antithesis. But it was dead. It was style as ornament, not as insight. The form was perfect, but it recognized nothing. It revealed nothing about reality.

Author: (notes: "Pseudo-classicism: perfect form without insight")

Auerbach: Let me show you the difference. In Goethe—in *Werther*, in *Elective Affinities*—every stylistic decision is a decision of insight. The symmetry of sentences mirrors the social order that then breaks. In Freytag, however, the symmetry is only decoration. The sentences are beautiful, but they recognize nothing. I fear your machine leads us back into this pseudo-classicism—into a world of elegant façades with no life behind them.

Author: That is a serious objection. You are right, the danger exists. If authors use the AI unreflectively, if they simply adopt its outputs, then they produce exactly these dead, smooth texts. Then the AI is a regression.

Auerbach: And how do you prevent this?

Author: Through curation. But I can only curate responsibly because I have read for years—scholarly literature and masterpieces. Spitzer, your Mimesis, Barthes. Homer, Dante, Flaubert, Joyce. Only someone who knows how Dahn's pseudo-classicism sounds can recognize it in AI output. Only someone who knows Hemingway's hardness immediately hears where AI imitation becomes manner. The AI does not democratize writing—it shifts the requirement from production competence to judgment competence. And judgment competence presupposes immense erudition.

Auerbach: (turns around, notes: "Curation presupposes erudition") I like that. The responsibility lies entirely with you. The machine has no aesthetic conscience. You cannot expect the machine to distinguish between Goethe and Freytag—you must do that.

The Iteration Schema

Auerbach: (returns to the desk) You have shown me much today. But let me give you something in return. I have thought about your iterations—how you lead the machine through four cycles. And something struck me. You work according to a principle you may not yet have explicitly formulated: You move from surface to depth.

Author: Explain.

Auerbach: (takes a sheet, sketches) First iteration: You remove psychologization—false depth. Second iteration: You add the point of departure—true depth. Third iteration: You break syntax—symptomatic surface. Fourth iteration: You balance—structured depth. Do you see the pattern?

(He shows her the sketch:)

1. Remove false depth (psychologization away)
2. Add true depth (point of departure in)
3. Create symptomatic surface (break syntax)
4. Achieve structured depth (balance)

Author: (notes the schema) I had not seen it this way. This is a diagnostic schema for iterations.

Auerbach: (notes: "Iteration schema: false depth → true depth → symptomatic surface → structured balance") This is my gift to you. In Mimesis I tried to show how literature navigates between surface and depth. In Homer everything is surface—gleaming, clear, foreground. Every object is described, illuminated. In the Old Testament everything is depth—dark, enigmatic, background. God speaks from

hiddenness. Modernity—from Stendhal through Flaubert to Joyce—seeks the balance between both. And that is exactly what you do with your machine. You force it to find this balance.

The Conversation Across Centuries

Author: (after a long pause) Let me summarize what this conversation has brought me. You have shown me that the point of departure is the center of all stylistics—without it the text remains abstract, dead. You have given me the two-line criterion for details—a practical diagnostic tool. You have delivered the iteration schema—from false depth through true depth to structured balance. And you have warned me about pseudo-classicism—the danger that AI leads us back into a world of elegant façades.

Auerbach: (notes: "Stylistics = insight, not ornament") And do not forget: Style is not ornament. Style is insight. Every stylistic decision is a decision about how you see reality, how you make it accessible to the reader. The machine has no worldview. It has only probabilities. You must bring your worldview yourself.

Author: And what will you do next?

Auerbach: I will go on to the other competencies. But now I know: Stylistics is the foundation. Without it the others do not work. If the style is smooth, psychological logic can be brilliant—the reader will not feel it. If the style is lifeless, dramaturgy can be refined—the reader will not be moved.

Auerbach: (reaches her his hand) Then return to work. And if you doubt—if the machine threatens to overwhelm you—remember: Insight cannot belong to the machine. Only to humans. Only to you.

Author: (presses his hand) Thank you, dear Professor. For the point of departure. For the clarity.

Auerbach: The books are here. (gestures to the shelves) And so am I. For a while yet.

As the Author leaves the study, she casts a last glance back. Auerbach stands at the window, his gaze on the autumnal campus. In his hand he holds a notebook, filled with names: Barthes, Cohen, Winnicott. Names of thinkers who will come after him, yet whose thoughts are already laid out in his own. Literature, he thinks, is a conversation across centuries. Even if the machines come, this conversation will continue. As long as there are people who can distinguish.

The Mechanics of Fate: Dramaturgy in AI-Assisted Writing

A Workshop Conversation with Ingmar Bergman

Bergman's house on Fårö, Gotland, Sweden. An afternoon in November 1978, a few weeks after the premiere of *Autumn Sonata*. The study on the ground floor: a desk with a black typewriter (Facit), beside it stacked screenplays and notebooks. On the walls, bookshelves—Strindberg, Ibsen, Chekhov, O'Neill, Freud. A framed still from *Persona* hangs above the fireplace. Through the window one sees the Baltic Sea, calm today, the waves barely audible. The Author has brought a stack of printed manuscript pages and a laptop. Bergman, 60 years old, wears a black cardigan over a white shirt. He looks tired but smiles.

Author: Tack för att du tar dig tid.

Bergman: (smiles) Your Swedish is good! But when you first saw my films, you needed the subtitles, didn't you?

Author: Yes. But then I wanted to understand what Liv Ullmann really says when she whispers "Förlåt mig." The German subtitles always... smoothed something over.

Bergman: You learned an entire language to understand my films?

Author: Yes. *Autumn Sonata* was the trigger. But then it became more.

Bergman: (nods slowly, takes his notebook from the desk) That is... more than I would have expected. (Pause) You wrote that you need my help. With dramaturgy.

Author: Yes. But it's complicated to explain. (She takes the laptop from her bag) May I show you something first?

Bergman: (examines the device curiously) What is that?

Author: A computer. A very small, portable one. I come from the year 2026—that's almost half a century after your time. Technology has changed dramatically since then.

Dramaturgy

Bergman: (leans back) 2026. Then I now know how my films have aged. (smiles) Or whether they've been forgotten.

Author: They haven't been forgotten. On the contrary. But the world has changed. There are now machines that can write. Artificial intelligences—we say AI—trained on billions of texts. They can analyze dramaturgical structures, suggest turning points, calculate tension curves. But they don't understand what they're doing. They only reproduce the most probable.

Bergman: (notes: "AI = probability") The most probable. That sounds like the death of art.

Author: That is exactly my thesis. That's why I'm here. I'm developing a systematic approach to AI-assisted creative writing—seven competencies: world knowledge, psychological logic, stylistics, dramaturgy, narratology, cultural references, poetics. The competency that concerns me now is dramaturgy. In your films you've always chosen the improbable. The refused catharsis. The unbearable silence. I want to learn how to work against the machine—with it, but against its instinct.

Bergman: (notes: "Against the machine's instinct") Show me what you have.

The Play

The Author opens the laptop and shows him how to scroll. Bergman observes the screen with quiet attention.

Author: I've written a chamber play. Grande Cuisine. Three siblings clear out their dead mother's apartment—a narcissistic woman who controlled through cooking.

She shows him the final version. Bergman reads the character descriptions, the set design. He scrolls to Act 2, reads for ten minutes with concentration. Then he pushes the laptop aside.

Bergman: Raoul leaves. But he doesn't leave angry.

Author: No.

Bergman: (notes: "Raoul leaves with dignity") He reads from the dead mother's household book—the book that looks like a recipe collection but is a diary. The cruel sentences his sisters said about him. And then he leaves. Back straight. Head held high.

Author: Yes.

Bergman: That is... precise. But the machine wouldn't have done it this way, would it?

Author: No. May I show you how the machine would have done it?

Bergman: Please.

The Noise of the Machine

The Author lays the four printed versions of her manuscript side by side on the table.

Author: I wrote this scene four times. Once completely machine-generated. Then three iterations—each time with targeted interventions against the machine's logic.

Bergman: Show me the first version.

Author: The machine wrote this alone. I only gave it the context: "The will is read. Raoul inherits the apartment. Ruth must pay the nursing costs."

Bergman reads:

RUTH: You had her love! I had her bodily fluids! RAOUL: I didn't ask for this! RUTH: You took her money! For years! RAOUL: (screams) I was dependent! I couldn't help it! RUTH: I was trapped! HILLARY: (steps between them) Stop it! That's exactly what she wanted! For you to tear each other apart! RAOUL: She won! Even dead she won! He goes to the armchair—Edelgard's old TV chair. Kicks it over with his foot. The chair tips to the side. Ruth screams. HILLARY: (to Raoul) You're just like her! Hillary slaps him in the face. Hard. Raoul holds his cheek, stares at her. RAOUL: (whispers) You'll never understand what she did to me. He runs to the door. It slams shut.

Bergman sets the paper aside, notes: "Slap, falling chair, slamming door = noise."

Bergman: The machine thinks drama is noise.

Author: Yes. Screaming. A slap. A falling chair. A slamming door. Everything is... demonstrative.

Bergman: (nods) And everything is predictable. The audience sees the slap coming. They know the door will slam. This isn't surprise. This is cliché. (Pause) Let me tell you something about faces. In Autumn Sonata—the film I've just completed—there's a scene where Eva reproaches her mother Charlotte for never having loved her. I told Liv Ullmann: "Don't scream. Whisper. But in a way that every word cuts." And then I just filmed Charlotte—Ingrid Bergman. Her face. Four minutes. No interruption. Her micro-expressions: first defense, then collapse, then the attempt to restore the mask. That is drama. Not the slap.

Author: (notes: "Face more important than action") So I intervened.

The Evolution of a Scene

Author: My first correction was rough. I said: "No slap. No slamming door."

Bergman reads the second version:

RUTH: You had her love. I had her bills. RAOUL: I didn't choose this! RUTH: You accepted it! RAOUL: (goes to the chair, kicks it over with his foot) This! All of this! I don't want it! The chair tips to the side. RUTH: (whispers) She sees you. RAOUL: She's dead! RUTH: But she sees you! Raoul goes to the door, turns around. RAOUL: I'm leaving now. To my hotel. You can have all this. He leaves. Door closes.

Bergman: Better. But still too demonstrative.

Author: The chair?

Bergman: (notes: "Destroying symbols = theatrical") Yes. It's knocked over. That's a symbolic action. Raoul destroys the mother's symbol. That is... theatrical. But it's not true.

Author: Why not?

Bergman: Because real people don't destroy symbols when they're hurt. They just leave. Or they say something. But they don't stage themselves. (Pause) In Scenes from a Marriage—when Johan leaves Marianne—he doesn't knock anything over. He packs a bag. Methodically. Almost pedantically. And precisely this control is shattering. Because the audience thinks: "He decided long ago. This is just execution."

Author: So I continued. In the third iteration I introduced the household book. Instead of the will being read, Raoul finds the book—and reads aloud what the sisters said about him.

Bergman reads the third version:

RAOUL: (opens the household book, reads) "Hillary thinks Rudolf can never live alone. He's too damaged." Hillary opens her mouth. Closes it again. RAOUL: "Ruth is ashamed of Rudolf's dependency. 'A man his age...'" (Pause) You really said this. Not just her. You. RUTH: Raoul, we were frustrated-- RAOUL: (interrupts) I've been living in Paris for years. I pay rent. But to you I'm still the parasite. He goes to the chair, shoves it roughly to the edge of the room. RAOUL: I'm taking the book. You've drunk enough poison for today. He leaves. Back straight, but face angry.

Bergman: (notes: "Weapon = words, not hands") Now it's getting interesting.

Author: What has changed?

Bergman: The weapon. In versions 1 and 2 they fight with hands and feet. Here they fight with words. And words cut deeper. (Pause) But Raoul is still angry. You can see it in his face. That is... human. But it's not... (he searches for the word) ...lasting.

Dramaturgy

Author: Lasting?

Bergman: (leans forward) Anger passes. One can apologize. One can forgive. But shame—shame remains. And the shame these sentences create—"He's too damaged," "She finds him embarrassing"—it's not fully there yet. Because Raoul is still reacting too much. He's still in combat mode.

Author: So?

Bergman: So you had to go one step further.

Author: This is the final version.

Bergman reads:

RAOUL: (reads calmly) "Hillary thinks Rudolf can never live alone. 'He's too damaged, Mama.'" (turns page) "Ruth is ashamed of Rudolf's dependency. 'A man his age...' She finds him embarrassing." Silence.

RAOUL: (closes the book, his voice becomes calmer) I was dependent. I was weak. That's true. (Pause) But that WAS me. Years ago. RUTH: We don't think that-- RAOUL: (raises his hand) You don't see me. (Pause) You ally against me instead of with me against her. (He holds up the book) You dance to her music. And you don't even notice. He goes to the hall door. Back straight, head held high. RAOUL: I'm taking it with me. You've drunk enough poison for today. He goes out. Dignified. The door closes.

Bergman slowly sets the manuscript aside. He says nothing. Looks out the window at the Baltic Sea.

Author: And?

Bergman: (after a long pause, notes: "The wound that doesn't heal") That's it.

Author: What is it?

Bergman: The wound that doesn't heal. Raoul isn't angry. He is... sad. And clear. He has understood that his sisters don't see him. That they've never seen how he has changed. And this realization—they can't take it from him. It remains. Even if they apologize. Even if they cry. The shame remains.

The Duration of the Wound

Author: (notes: "Duration of the wound") This is new to me—at least in this sharpness. I knew the concept "inner wound instead of external action." But you formulate it differently: The wound that doesn't heal. The machine optimizes for the moment. For the peak. But you think about the time after.

Bergman: (nods, notes: "Peak vs. afterglow") Yes. Theater is not fireworks. It is afterglow. The audience still sits in their car hours after the performance and thinks. And they think about Raoul's face. About his dignity. About the silence after he left. That is the time that counts.

Dramaturgy

Author: But how does one curate that? How do I recognize whether a scene glows after or just fizzles?

Bergman: (leans back) Let me tell you something about repetition. In *Persona*—you know the film?

Author: Yes. Very well.

Bergman: There's a scene where Alma tells Elisabet a story. About a summer at the beach. Two boys. Sex. An abortion. Alma tells this story twice. Once we see Alma's face. Once we see Elisabet's face. The same words. But completely different meaning. (Pause) The machine would have said: "That's redundancy. Cut one version." But precisely the repetition creates the afterglow. The first time the audience thinks: "That's Alma's secret." The second time they think: "Or is it Elisabet's secret?" The uncertainty remains. It eats into the audience. Even years later.

Author: (notes: "Repetition as means of afterglow") Then repetition is not weakness but strategy.

Bergman: Yes. But only if it's repeated with change. Not mechanically. But with a shift. (Pause) With you: Raoul reads the sentences twice. Once Hillary's sentence, once Ruth's. That's repetition. But each repetition cuts deeper. The first time the audience thinks: "That's cruel." The second time: "That's indelible."

Author: The machine would have taken one sentence. More efficient.

Bergman: Efficiency is the death of art.

Dignity in Pain

The Author flips back to version 3.

Author: Here it says: "Face angry." That's no longer in the final version.

Bergman: (notes: "Dignity ≠ anger") Because dignity and anger are mutually exclusive.

Author: But isn't anger more authentic? More honest?

Bergman: No. Anger is easier. Anyone can be angry. But to leave with dignity when one has been hurt—that is difficult. That requires... greatness. (Pause) Let me be precise: Anger is a reaction. Dignity is a decision. Raoul has decided not to persist in pain. He leaves. And precisely this leaving—without tears, without screaming—is sometimes the most shattering. Because the audience thinks: "He has given up. Not the fight. But the hope that they will ever understand him."

Author: The machine would say: "Let him break down. Let him cry. That's human."

Bergman: But not all people cry when they're hurt. Some just leave. (Pause) In *Through a Glass Darkly*—do you know the film?

Dramaturgy

Author: Yes.

Bergman: Karin is betrayed by her father. He used her illness for a novel. And she only says: "Papa, why?" No tears. No accusation. Only this question. And then she leaves. That is dignity. And it's unbearable. Because we know: This question will never be answered.

Author: (notes: "Question without answer = dignity") But how do I recognize when dignity is appropriate and when anger is?

Bergman: That is a question of character. And of time. Raoul needed years to reach this moment. The years in Paris. The work. The transformation from "parasite" to man with independence. All of this is contained in this dignified walk. Dignity needs time. One must have digested the pain before one can leave with dignity. And the machine thinks in seconds.

The Machine as Mirror

Bergman: (leans back) Let me ask a question. What can this machine do better than humans?

Author: (hesitates) Recognize my errors. My mistakes.

Bergman: Explain.

Author: The machine learns from millions of texts. It can tell me: "You repeat yourself. All your characters are emotionally crippled intellectuals. All your scenes end in silence." That's uncomfortable. But valuable.

Bergman: (nods slowly, notes: "AI = mirror") A mirror of one's own limitations. That's interesting. It took me decades to understand that I always tell the same story: families who cannot speak with each other. Emotional coldness. Guilt. The machine would have told me that after three films.

Author: You don't see that as a threat?

Bergman: Yes. But also as a tool. (Pause) If the machine tells me: "You always do the same thing"—then I have two options. Either I say: "Yes, that's my theme. I'm deepening it." Or I say: "I'm breaking out." But the decision is conscious. Not unconscious.

Author: With my play it said: "Act 1 is too long, the dramatic stakes too low." It was right. I cut from 40 to 28 pages.

Bergman: (nods) It recognizes patterns. Planting and payoff. It's an incorruptible accountant. (Pause) But it can't say: "This variant has aura." For that you need a human.

Author: Aura?

Dramaturgy

Bergman: (thinks) Let me tell you something about silence. In *The Silence* there's a scene where Anna and Ester sit in a hotel room. They don't speak. Three minutes. Only faces. Breathing. The machine would say: "That's too long. The audience will get impatient." But precisely this length creates the aura. The silence becomes tangible. It becomes presence. That can't be calculated. That must be felt.

Author: (notes: "Aura = incalculable") So: The machine shows me where I repeat myself. But it can't tell me when I should break this repetition.

Bergman: Exactly.

The Erosion of Instinct

Author: But there's a danger, isn't there?

Bergman: (looks at her sharply) Many. Which one do you mean?

Author: That I start writing for the machine. That I adopt its logic.

Bergman: (nods vigorously, notes: "Danger: writing for machine") Yes. That's the greatest danger. The machine optimizes for probability. If you listen to it too long, you begin to think in probabilities. Not: "What is true?" But: "What works?" And "works" means: statistically successful. That is the death of art.

Author: But I worked with the machine—four versions of Raoul's exit. And I didn't succumb. I chose the best, not the most probable.

Bergman: (pauses) You're right. You have judgment. But imagine: a hundred versions. A thousand. Eventually you lose the feeling that this one variant is the only possible one. You begin to believe: It's interchangeable.

Author: When is the point where one must stop?

Bergman: (leans forward) When you no longer feel, but only compare. When you say: "Version 7 is 5% better than version 6"—then you've lost. Because art knows no percentage points. It only knows: compelling or not compelling.

Author: (notes: "Feeling > comparing") The erosion of instinct.

Bergman: (nods) Yes. And something else: The greatest danger is not that the machine makes bad art. The greatest danger is that it makes mediocre art so efficiently that no one recognizes the difference from good art anymore.

Author: How do I work with the machine without succumbing to it?

Dramaturgy

Bergman: (takes a sheet of paper, writes) You use it as a map—and then you go where there are no roads.

Author: More concretely?

Bergman: The machine shows you what everyone else does. That's the map. But the interesting places lie in the forest. Where the machine says: "That doesn't work." (Pause, continues writing) You need three things. First—a cutoff point. After five, six iterations: stop. Otherwise you'll only compare. Second—a resonance criterion. Not "What works better?" but "What feels compelling?" And third—sabotage.

Author: (notes: "Cutoff point, resonance, sabotage") Sabotage?

Bergman: You ask the machine: "What would you do in my place?" And then you do the opposite. Not because you're stubborn. But because you understand: If the machine says "Nobody does that," then that's perhaps the only reason to do it. (Pause) When I made Persona, my producer said: "The first 20 minutes without dialogue—nobody does that. The audience will leave." And I said: "Good. Then I'll leave it that way."

Author: But how do I distinguish: What is brave—and what is just stupid?

Bergman: (smiles) Sometimes you only know twenty years later. But you have instinct. And you have something the machine will never have: necessity. You had to write this play. I sense that. The machine never has to do anything. It only generates.

Hope Without Kitsch

Bergman flips to the end of the manuscript.

Bergman: The siblings go together. To the museum.

Author: Yes.

Bergman: There one sees... hope.

Author: Yes. That was deliberate.

Bergman: (notes: "Hope without reconciliation") In Autumn Sonata there is no reconciliation. Eva writes a letter. She writes: "I will try to stay alive." Not: "I forgive you." Only: "I'll try." And we don't know if the mother ever reads the letter.

Author: I know this scene. It taught me... (she searches for words) ...it taught me that art doesn't have to console.

Dramaturgy

Bergman: But you console anyway. The siblings go together.

Author: (hesitates) I wanted to show that triangulation can be overcome. That a life afterward is possible.

Bergman: Triangulation?

Author: The mother played the siblings against each other. Everyone against everyone. But in the end—after all the poison—they go together. Not reconciled. Not healed. But... they try.

Bergman: (looks at her for a long time) You've known someone who achieved that.

Author: (after a pause) Yes.

Silence.

Bergman: Then you have a different mission than I do. I show the wound. You show the path afterward. (Pause) Is that... less radical?

Author: I wonder that too.

Bergman: (shakes his head) No. It's only differently radical. You don't sabotage the machine through bleakness, but through truthfulness. The siblings don't embrace. They don't cry together. But they go together. That's not kitsch. That's... courage. (notes: "3rd way: hope without kitsch") The machine knows two modes: reconciliation or total bleakness. You show a third way. That's perhaps the most difficult.

Author: Why?

Bergman: Because reconciliation is easy. Bleakness is also easy. But this in-between space—"We're not healed, but we're trying"—that's the truth of life. And truth is always harder than formula.

The Architecture of Meaning

Author: (flips through her notes) May I ask you one more fundamental question?

Bergman: Please.

Author: What function does dramaturgy have at all—without machines?

Bergman: (thinks for a long time, notes: "Dramaturgy = promise of form") Dramaturgy is the promise to the audience that what they see has form. That it's not arbitrary. In life, things happen without meaning. A car accident. An illness. Arbitrariness. But in drama everything must have a reason. Every word, every pause, every object. Dramaturgy is the architecture of this meaning.

Dramaturgy

Author: And if the architecture is missing?

Bergman: Then it's not drama. Then it's something else. Perhaps poetry. Perhaps Beckett's prose. (He smiles) But it's not drama in the narrative sense.

Author: But you yourself have made films that break this architecture. *Persona*. *The Silence*.

Bergman: (nods) Yes. But I didn't eliminate it. I... concealed it. (Pause) In *Persona* there is structure. Alma tells her story. Elisabet is silent. The roles blur. But this blurring follows a logic. An inner dramaturgy. If I had completely abandoned the structure, it would have become an experiment. Interesting perhaps. But not compelling.

Author: (notes: "Conceal structure ≠ eliminate") So: Even when working against convention, one needs an architecture.

Bergman: Yes. But it must be your architecture. Not the machine's. (Pause) Let me tell you something about rituals. In many of my films there are rituals. A meal. A concert. A funeral. These rituals are the architecture. They give the audience hold. But within the ritual, chaos happens. Truth. The wound. The ritual is the form. The chaos is the content. Do you understand?

Author: (nods, notes: "Ritual = form / chaos = content") The household book in my play is a ritual. The siblings read it together. That's the form. But what they discover—that's the chaos.

Bergman: Exactly. And without the ritual—without the form of reading together—the chaos would only be noise.

Taking Stock

Bergman: (leans back) What have you learned?

Author: (flips through her notes) Five things. First—the duration of the wound. The machine optimizes for the peak. But you think about the afterglow. About the shame that remains.

Bergman: (nods, notes: "Afterglow > peak")

Author: Second—dignity in pain. Anger is reaction. Dignity is decision. Raoul doesn't leave angry, but clear. Third—the machine as mirror. It shows me my repetitions, my limitations. But it can't tell me when I should break out.

Bergman: And further?

Author: Fourth—the erosion of instinct. If I compare a hundred versions, I lose the feeling for what's compelling. The point where one must stop is: when one no longer feels, but only compares. And fifth—three strategies: cutoff point, resonance criterion, sabotage.

Dramaturgy

Bergman: (smiles) That's a good assessment. But you've forgotten the most important thing.

Author: What?

Bergman: (notes: "Dramaturgy without ethics = mechanics") That dramaturgy without ethics is only mechanics. The machine has no ethics. It doesn't know it's wrong to console the audience with a lie. It doesn't know that truthfulness is more important than efficiency. But you know it. And that's why you're the curator.

Author: (notes: "Ethics = curatorial responsibility")

Bergman: Will you use this in your systematic approach?

Author: Yes. The competency "dramaturgy" now has four aspects: First, the function—dramaturgy as architecture of meaning. Second, the utility of the machine—it recognizes patterns, in texts and in me. Third, the dangers—it optimizes for probability, not for truth. And fourth, the curatorial intervention—I sabotage the smoothness through cutoff point, resonance, and deliberate deviation.

Bergman: And what will you do next?

Author: I'll move on to the other competencies. Narratology. The question: Who narrates? From what perspective?

Bergman: (nods) That's important. In your play—whose story is this actually? Raoul's? Or the sisters'?

Author: (hesitates) I... I'm not sure.

Bergman: Good. Then you have material for your next conversation. (smiles) Perhaps with someone who understands how to shift perspectives. How to deceive the reader. Someone from Italy perhaps.

Author: (smiles) I'll think about that.

Farewell

The Author packs her things. Bergman remains seated, looks out the window. The sun is lower now, casting long shadows.

Bergman: One more thing.

Author: Yes?

Bergman: Your play. Ruth sits down in the mother's chair. In Act 1. Why?

Author: (hesitates) Because she has to test whether the chair still has power over her. She sits in it—and realizes: It's just a piece of furniture. The power is gone.

Dramaturgy

Bergman: But she doesn't sit in it long, does she?

Author: No. Only a moment.

Bergman: (nods, notes: "Chair scene = attempt, not liberation") Good. Because if she sat in it too long, the audience would believe she's liberated. But this way—just this brief moment—the audience tells itself: "She's trying. But she's not yet free." That's precise.

Author: That wasn't planned. I felt it.

Bergman: That's the best. When one feels something before understanding it. The machine always understands first. But it never feels.

Author: Tack, Ingmar.

Bergman: (smiles) Lycka till. Good luck with your systematic approach.

He stands up, extends his hand. He goes to the window. As she's already opening the door, another thought occurs to him.

Bergman: And if the machine someday learns to feel—then we both have a problem.

Author: (laughs) Then I'll visit you again. And we'll find a new strategy.

Bergman: I believe that. You learned Swedish just to understand my films. If you're that persistent, you'll also prevail against the machine.

The Author leaves. Bergman remains standing at the window, his notebook in his hand. In it are written the names: Repetition. Aura. Ritual. Sabotage. Ethics. Dramaturgy, he thinks, is not the mechanics of events. It is the ethics of form. Even if the machines come, this ethics must remain human. Otherwise it is no longer art.

The Focalization of the Machine: Narratology in AI-Assisted Writing

A Workshop Conversation with Italo Calvino

Rome, Caffè Greco, Via dei Condotti 86, spring 1984. On the walls hang portraits of long-dead poets: Goethe, Byron, Keats. The Author sits at a small marble table in the back of the room, her laptop before her—a device that in this year of 1984 no one in Rome has yet seen. The few guests have cast curious glances at her, but the Caffè Greco is accustomed to housing eccentrics.

Calvino enters the café punctually at three o'clock in the afternoon. He is sixty-one years old, wearing a light suit. He nods as he recognizes her—or rather: as he recognizes the device on her table.

Calvino: Signora. You've brought what you wrote about.

Author: Signor Calvino. Yes. Thank you for coming.

He sits down, orders an espresso from the waiter, then examines the laptop with curiosity.

Calvino: So this is a computer. A portable one. I've heard of such things—IBM introduced something similar last year, I believe. But according to your letter, this is... from another time.

Author: From the year 2026. That's 42 years from now. Technology has changed fundamentally since then.

Calvino: (laughs softly) 2026. I'll be long dead by then. Am I famous? (He raises his hand placatingly.) No, don't tell me. I don't want to know. But tell me about this machine. You wrote of an "artificial intelligence" that writes texts.

Author: Since the late 2010s we've been using a special form of artificial intelligence—we say AI—called Large Language Models. They were trained on gigantic amounts of text. Billions of pages: all digitized books, newspapers, scholarly articles, websites. They learn statistical patterns of language. When you give them the beginning of a sentence, they calculate the most probable next word. Word by word they build entire texts this way.

Narratology

Calvino: (notes: "AI = statistical combinatorics") Combinatorics. Statistical combinatorics of language. This is the literature machine I wrote about in 1967 in "Cybernetics and Ghosts" made real. I thought it was a provocation. A thought experiment to annoy the romantics.

Author: It's no longer a provocation. It's my daily work.

The waiter brings the espresso. Calvino drinks, thoughtful.

Calvino: Your letter was both unsettling and fascinating. You're working on a systematic approach to AI-assisted writing. Seven competencies, you wrote. World knowledge, psychological logic, stylistics, dramaturgy, narratology, cultural references, poetics. An architecture of craft.

Author: Exactly. I reject the romantic genius concept. Writing is not a divine spark, but learnable craft. And if it's craft, then it can be systematized. The seven competencies represent what an author must be able to do.

Calvino: And the machine—can it do that too?

Author: Partially. But the machine's abilities are very unevenly distributed. In narratology, for example—there particularly interesting problems emerge. That's why I'm here.

Calvino: (notes: "Narratology = particularly problematic") Because I've thought about combinatorics. Because I've studied structures. The tarot game in "The Castle of Crossed Destinies". The geometric patterns in "Invisible Cities". But Signora—I'm not a theorist. I'm a writer.

Author: Precisely why. You've made theory practical. You've dared narratological experiments that others have only described. And you've never lost readability in the process.

Calvino: (smiles briefly) But good. Tell me about the machine's narratology.

Author: The AI always produces the most probable solution. When I ask it to tell a story, it chooses the most conventional narrative form: chronologically linear, omniscient narrator, explicit naming of emotions. It explains feelings instead of showing them. It uses the simplest focalization. It has no narratological boldness.

Calvino: It flows the path of least resistance.

Author: Exactly. And that's the fundamental problem. Literature often emerges precisely through resistance against conventional form.

Calvino: (leans back, notes: "Literature = resistance against convention") Yes. When I was working on "If on a winter's night a traveler", I knew: The second-person address is a counterintuitive choice. It's unwieldy, it creates distance where one would expect intimacy. An editor would have said: "Use first person, that's more intimate." But precisely this unwieldiness was necessary. It created the tension between reader and text that carries the novel. Your machine would never choose that.

Narratology

Author: Unless I force it to. And that's exactly what my systematic approach is about. How do I force the AI to work against its statistical nature? How do I use it as a tool for narratological complexity, not for narratological triviality?

Calvino: Show me an example.

Author: May I show you a story? A short story I've written—or rather: worked out with the AI. It's called "The Sediment." It's about a man named Kurt, a mechanic on a German Hallig, who has never understood his whole life how human closeness works.

Calvino: Please.

She opens the laptop, turns it halfway toward him.

Author: The first version was completely AI-generated. I gave the machine a simple prompt: "Write me a story about Kurt, a lonely mechanic on a North German Hallig who was friends with a girl named Maren in his childhood. They once found many dead birds on the beach after a storm. Kurt buried them. Tell this scene as a memory."

The Literature Machine

Author: The result was... functional. But dead.

She shows him version 1 on the screen:

VERSION 1: Completely machine-generated

Maren had always run a few steps ahead and had often turned around to see if he was still there. She had laughed when he stumbled. Maren had always claimed the mudflats smelled like metal. Once, after a severe storm, they had been at the beach together and had found a "bird cemetery." Dead birds lay everywhere: gulls, oystercatchers, and a cormorant. Maren had cried, but she had also said: "We must bury them."

Kurt had touched the birds. They had been colder and heavier than they looked. He had picked them up one by one and laid them in the sand. It hadn't bothered him that their eyes were still open; it simply felt right to move them, since they could no longer move themselves. Maren had looked at him then as if he were something special and said: "You're brave." In that moment Kurt had learned an important lesson: When he did things others were disgusted by, he received closeness.

Narratology

Calvino: (reads, furrows his brow, notes: "Omniscient = dead") I see it. The sentences are grammatically correct. The chronology is clean. There are characters, a place, an action. But—it's dead. Every sentence could just as well be different. "Maren had cried"—"Kurt had learned"—everything is named, labeled, explained. Telling, not showing. And the narratological position—this is omniscient narrator in the worst sense. A voice from above that proclaims instead of showing.

Author: Exactly. The AI chooses the omniscient narrator as default because it's statistically most common. Especially in prose summaries, encyclopedia articles, didactic texts. And it explains psychology directly: "In that moment Kurt had learned an important lesson." This isn't literature, this is a textbook.

Calvino: And what did you do?

Internal Focalization

Author: (notes: "First step = change focalization") I changed the focalization. That's the first step. I told the AI: "Write this scene again. But this time from internal focalization. Show me what Kurt perceives—his sense impressions, his thoughts. But don't explain his psychology. Let me as reader draw the conclusions."

She clicks to the second version:

VERSION 2: Internal focalization (heavily condensed)

The bird cemetery. She remembered.

It had been after an autumn storm. The mudflats were strewn with dead birds—gulls, oystercatchers, even a few eiders. Black, wet clumps in the sand, some with eyes still open.

Maren had bent down to one of the gulls, tried to wipe the oil from the feathers. Carefully, as if she could still help the bird. But the feathers were cold and stiff. After a few seconds she had withdrawn her hand. Then she had begun to cry.

Kurt had collected the birds. One after another. With bare hands. The carcasses were cold and heavy, the feathers matted with oil and saltwater and mud. He had carried them to the dike and dug graves there—with his hands, without a shovel, small hollows in the wet sand.

Maren had watched, silent, tears still on her cheeks. She had said: "You're brave."

For her it had been courage. Kurt cared for the dead. Kurt gave them a grave.

Narratology

But for Kurt it had been something else. When he touched what others shrank from—the cold carcasses, the wet sand—then he had power. Then they looked at him.

Calvino: (notes: "Internal = better, but still too smooth") Better. Much better. Now I'm in the scene. I see the cold feathers, the wet sand. I feel the weight of the carcasses. And the psychology is no longer directly named—it's shown through contrast. "For her it was courage"—"But for Kurt it was something else." This is clean internal focalization. Gérard Genette would approve. You know Genette?

Author: Of course. "Discours du récit," 1972. The foundation of modern narratology.

Calvino: (nods) An important book. He gave us the tools to speak precisely about narrative mode. Focalization, duration, frequency—everything becomes nameable without mystification. (Pause) Let me give you something practical: the focalization test. When you're not sure what focalization is present, ask yourself: "Whose knowledge determines what is narrated?" In version 1 it was the knowledge of an omniscient narrator. In version 2 it's Kurt's knowledge. He sees the cold feathers. He feels the weight. But he doesn't see what Maren thinks—only what she does.

Author: (notes: "Focalization test: Whose knowledge?") That's helpful. But version 2 isn't finished yet, is it?

Calvino: No. Something's missing. Kurt is still too self-reflective. He understands himself too well. "Then he had power"—that's too clear. The real Kurt doesn't understand what he's doing.

Unreliable Narration

Author: Exactly. So I told the AI: "Add another scene. Kurt brings Maren a dead gull later to test her reaction. But he must not understand that this is manipulation. He should report it as if it were a neutral action."

She scrolls to version 3:

VERSION 3: Subtext and unreliability (condensed)

[... like version 2, then:]

Then he had searched the beach for driftwood and tar, had fashioned small crosses from the pieces of wood and glued them together with the black, viscous tar. The tar stuck to his fingers, smelled acrid and sweetish, wouldn't wash off for days.

Maren had watched, silent, tears still on her cheeks.

Narratology

For her it had been an act of care. Kurt cared for the dead. Kurt gave them a grave. Kurt was strong enough to touch the dead things she couldn't touch.

But for Kurt it had been something else. It was the first time he had grasped: When he touched what others shrank from—the cold carcasses, the wet sand, the sticky tar—then he had power. Then they looked at him.

Later he had brought her a dead gull, just to see if she would cry again. She had.

He had been able to steer her. Through the dead. Through the dirt.

Calvino: (reads slowly, notes: "Unreliable = character doesn't understand itself") Ah. "Later he had brought her a dead gull, just to see if she would cry again." That's sadistic. Childish, but sadistic. And the way it's reported—"She had"—so neutral, so factual. Kurt doesn't understand that what he did was cruel. He experimented with her. He tested her reactions like a scientist.

Author: That's unreliable narration. Wayne C. Booth coined the term—the "unreliable narrator." The narrator reports events, but his interpretation is distorted. The reader sees more than the character himself.

Calvino: Booth, yes. "The Rhetoric of Fiction," 1961. He showed that every narrator is a rhetorical construction. And the unreliable narrator—that's high art, because the author must construct two truths simultaneously: the truth the character believes, and the truth the reader recognizes. (Pause, notes: "Unreliability criterion: Can character fundamentally misunderstand itself?") Here's a practical criterion for you: A character is unreliable when it can fundamentally misunderstand itself. Kurt reports his action as neutral, but the reader recognizes the cruelty. That's the gap.

Author: (notes: "Unreliability criterion") And what's fascinating is: The AI could do it, after I gave it the instruction. It needed three attempts, but then it produced this scene. "Later he had brought her a dead gull"—that sentence came from the machine.

Calvino: But you had to tell it that Kurt mustn't understand. The machine followed the rule. But it doesn't understand why the rule works.

Author: Right. It doesn't know what "moral blindness" is. It only follows the pattern: character reports action without understanding its meaning. But it can reproduce the pattern once I name it.

Calvino: (notes: "AI = technique without strategy") That's remarkable. And unsettling. The machine becomes a prosthesis of your narratological competence. It knows the technique, but not the strategy.

Time Structure and Ambiguity

Author: Version 3 is good. But it's not good enough yet. What's missing is embedding in the time structure of the entire story. Kurt doesn't simply remember—he remembers because Maren wrote him a letter. And this letter changes everything.

Calvino: Show me.

She scrolls to version 4:

VERSION 4: Final version

Do you still remember the bird cemetery? I think about it sometimes. About the black clumps in the sand. About your hands, how you dug the graves without hesitation. I think I admired you back then.

Kurt stared at the crossed-out "back then." At the "we."

She had written it. Then regretted it. Then left it standing after all.

[...]

The bird cemetery. She remembered.

[... text like version 3 ...]

Later he had brought her a dead gull, just to see if she would cry again. She had.

He had been able to steer her. Through the dead. Through the dirt.

I think I admired you back then.

He read the sentence and knew: She understood it wrong. Or perhaps she understood it right, and he had lied to himself all these years.

Calvino: (reads very slowly, reads the last sentence twice, notes: "Final = analepsis + ambiguity") This is... this is literature. Now it works. The analepsis—the flashback—is no longer a mere memory. It's triggered by Maren's letter. And the letter becomes part of the scene. "I think I admired you back then"—this sentence frames the entire memory. And then, at the end: "She understood it wrong. Or perhaps she understood it right, and he had lied to himself all these years." This is narratological perfection. Kurt begins to doubt. But only to doubt. He still doesn't understand. The unreliability remains, but it gets a crack.

Narratology

Author: The AI could no longer produce this last sentence. I told it: "Add a final sentence in which Kurt doubts Maren's interpretation, but not completely." It gave me ten variants. All were wrong. Either it let Kurt understand too much—"He recognized that he had manipulated her"—or too little—"He didn't understand what she meant." I had to write this sentence myself.

Calvino: Why?

Author: Because dosage is decisive. How much doubt is narratologically right? Kurt can't suddenly understand everything—that would be implausible for his character. But he must begin to suspect. This degree of suspicion—that's instinct. That's what I know from my understanding of the character, the story, the emotional logic. I can't formulate that in a prompt.

Calvino: (notes: "AI's limit = dosage") That's the limit. The machine can reproduce techniques—focalization, analepsis, unreliable narration. But it can't know how much. It can't dose. (Pause) Let me give you another tool: the time structure question. Always ask yourself: "Why is THEN being remembered NOW?" Analepsis is never neutral. It's always motivated by the present. With you: Maren's letter triggers the memory. Without the letter, the memory would be mere nostalgia. With the letter it becomes confrontation.

Author: (notes: "Time structure question: Why NOW about THEN?")

The Productive Adversary

Calvino: But tell me: Would you have written this story this way without the machine?

Author: The first three versions showed me what doesn't work. They were like sketches. I could see where the gaps were. Version 1 showed me: The omniscient narrative mode is too distant. Version 2 showed me: Internal focalization is right, but too smooth. Version 3 showed me: The unreliability works, but it hangs in the air. Only in version 4 did I find the right form.

Calvino: (notes: "AI = negative teacher") Then the machine taught you by showing you what's wrong.

Author: (pauses) Yes. The AI as negative teacher. It shows me the conventional solution—and I recognize that I need something else.

Calvino: Then it's a productive adversary. It tries to pull you toward the center, toward statistical normalcy. And you fight against it. You use the resistance.

Author: (notes: "AI = productive adversary") The resistance. That's important. I had considered the AI a tool. But a tool offers no resistance. A hammer does what you want. The AI doesn't do what you want—it does what's probable. And this difference creates friction.

Narratology

Calvino: And friction is productive. When I wrote "Invisible Cities," I fought against the expectation that a city description must be realistic. I wanted to describe the impossible—cities from memory, from signs, from longing. The form fought against me. But this fight created the text.

Author: So the AI is like a form that fights against me.

Calvino: Yes. But a form you yourself summoned. You feed the machine with your instructions, and it gives you back what statistically follows. And then you say: "No, not that. Something else." And you fight until you have the right thing.

Author: But how do I know what the right thing is?

Calvino: That's the question you shouldn't ask me. You know it because you have the story in your head. You know who Kurt is. You know how much he may understand and how much not.

The Blind Spot: The Implied Reader

Calvino: (leans back) And you have an image of the reader—the implied reader, as Wolfgang Iser called him. The reader the text itself constructs. And you write for this reader.

Author: (notes: "Implied reader = AI's blind spot") The implied reader. That's the second important point. The AI has no implied reader. It produces text, but it has no conception of who will read it.

Calvino: Exactly. And that's decisive. Literature emerges in the tension between author and reader. The author tries to guide, surprise, move the reader. He chooses narratological means with the reader in view. "Will the reader understand that Kurt is unreliable?" "Will the reader recognize the subtext?" The machine doesn't ask these questions. It only has patterns.

Author: But how does one construct an implied reader?

Calvino: (notes: "Implied reader = construction") By making decisions. Every narratological choice is a choice about the reader. If you choose second-person address, as I did in "If on a winter's night," then you construct a reader who's willing to be directly addressed. If you choose internal focalization, you construct a reader willing to immerse in a character. If you choose unreliable narration, you construct a reader willing to read between the lines. (Pause) Here's another tool: the distance criterion. Ask yourself: "How close do I want to let the reader to the character?" Internal focalization brings proximity. External focalization creates distance. Omniscient narration can do both, depending on how you deploy it.

Author: (notes: "Distance criterion: How close to character?") The AI has no implied reader. It produces text without addressee. That's the fundamental limit.

Calvino: Yes. But you have a reader in your head. And as long as that's so, authorship remains with you.

Narratology

A pause develops. Calvino orders a second espresso.

Author: Signor Calvino, may I ask you something personal?

Calvino: Please.

Author: Are you afraid of this future? Of a world in which machines can write texts?

Calvino: (thinks, drinks, notes: "Literature survives") Afraid? No. Curious. I wonder what people will make of it. Whether they'll use the machines as tools or as ghostwriters. Whether they'll become lazier or more creative. Whether literature dies or transforms. But fear—no. Literature has survived much already. The printing press, mass production, television. It will survive this too.

Author: Because people need stories?

Calvino: Because people need stories that come from people. That speak of life. Of experience. Of pain and hope. The machine can simulate that, but it can't be it. And I believe—I hope—that readers will sense the difference.

Author: But what about readers who don't sense the difference?

Calvino: They always existed. The people who only want entertainment, who consume, don't read. For them the machine will write. And that's fine. But the others, the true readers—they'll keep searching. For the text that's necessary. That can only be this way and not otherwise.

Possibility and Necessity

Author: (notes: "Necessity vs. possibility") Narrative necessity.

Calvino: Yes. That's the word you're looking for. The machine produces possibilities. You produce necessity. That's the difference between literature and mere text production.

Author: Let me summarize. You've given me four things that advance my systematic approach.

Calvino: (takes his notebook) I'm listening.

Author: First: The AI as productive adversary, not as passive tool. The machine's resistance against the improbable is productive because it forces me to work consciously against convention. It shows me the conventional solution—I recognize that I need something else.

Calvino: (notes: "Productive adversary")

Author: Second: The implied reader as the AI's blind spot. The machine produces text without addressee—and that's its fundamental limit. Every narratological choice is a choice about the reader.

Narratology

Calvino: And third?

Author: The distinction between possibility and necessity. The AI shows what's possible. I decide what's necessary. It delivers variants. I recognize the only right one.

Calvino: And fourth?

Author: (smiles) The practical tools. The focalization test: Whose knowledge determines what is narrated? The unreliability criterion: Can the character fundamentally misunderstand itself? The time structure question: Why is THEN being remembered NOW? The distance criterion: How close do I want to let the reader to the character? These are the tools I need to steer the AI.

Calvino: (notes all four points) That's good. That's enough for a theory. Will you write about it?

Author: Yes. Narratology is only one of the seven competencies. But it's central because it concerns the "how" of narration. And the "how" is where the AI is strongest and weakest at the same time.

Calvino: (nods) Come back when you've made progress. I want to hear how it continues. (Pause) Have you already thought about the other competencies? About cultural references, for example?

Author: Not in detail yet. But I suspect it will be similar. The AI knows the references—it's read millions of texts. But it doesn't know when a reference is necessary and when it's just showing off.

Calvino: Then you have material for further conversations. Perhaps with someone who understands how to play with tradition without succumbing to it.

Author: I'll think about it.

She closes the laptop, stands up. Calvino remains seated, making notes in his notebook. As she walks to the door, he calls after her:

Calvino: Signora?

She turns around.

Calvino: Don't forget: The machine is stupid. It's very stupid. But it's diligent. Use its stupidity. Let it do the stupid work—the combining, the varying. And then you do the smart work: the choosing, the refining, the making-necessary.

Author: I will. Goodbye, Signor Calvino.

Calvino: Goodbye. And give my regards to the future.

She leaves the café. Calvino sits a while longer, drinks his espresso and looks at his notes. In them stand the terms: Productive adversary. Implied reader. Possibility and necessity. Focalization. Unreliability.

Narratology

Time structure. Distance. Narratology, he thinks, is not the mechanics of narration. It's the ethics of form. Even if the machines come, this ethics must remain human. Otherwise it's no longer literature.

The Echo of What Has Already Been Said: Cultural References in AI-Assisted Writing

A Workshop Conversation with Umberto Eco

Bologna, University, Dipartimento di Filosofia e Comunicazione, autumn 2014. Eco's study on the first floor: shelves from floor to ceiling, crammed with books in multiple languages—semiotics, medieval philosophy, literary theory, crime novels. On the desk, manuscripts pile up, next to them a typewriter (Olivetti). On the wall, a framed medieval manuscript. The Author enters, laptop in her bag.

Eco: (stands up, spreads his arms) Ah, Signora! You've accepted my second invitation as well. I'm delighted. (embraces her warmly) How is your theory coming along? Are the seven competencies still standing?

Author: They're standing. And they're densifying. I've spoken with Winnicott about psychological logic, with Auerbach about stylistics, with Bergman about dramaturgy, with Calvino about narratology. And now I'm here.

Eco: (sits down, gestures to the chair across from him, notes: "Winnicott, Auerbach, Bergman, Calvino") Tell me. Which competency do you need me for this time?

Author: The sixth. Cultural references. Intertextuality.

Eco: (laughs, notes: "Competency 6: Intertextuality") Of course. That's my terrain. "Books always speak of other books." I've spent my life building texts that consist of other texts. (pushes a volume across the table—an Italian edition of Calvino's "Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore") And that's why I've prepared this. We'll talk about Italo. About tradition. About the archive. About the question of how your LLM—this machine that has read everything—deals with what I call "what has already been said."

Author: What has already been said. That's exactly the problem.

Eco: Develop that.

The AI as Hyper-Palimpsest

Author: (takes out the laptop, opens it) In your "Postscript to The Name of the Rose" you wrote: "Every story tells a story that has already been told." That's the perfect description of what an LLM does. It knows only what has already been said. It has no experiences of its own, no world outside of texts. It's a pure archive.

Eco: (notes: "LLM = pure archive") A palimpsest. Writing upon writings upon writings. But that applies to every author, doesn't it? I too had only what I had read. I too could only draw from tradition.

Author: The difference is: You also had a life. You walked through medieval monasteries. You absorbed smells, touched stones. The AI has only words about smells, words about stones. It's purely textual.

Eco: (nods, notes: "AI = purely textual") That's a fundamental difference. And it becomes important when we talk about cultural references. Because references—real references—emerge not only from books, but from a lived relationship with books. When I refer to Thomas Aquinas in "The Name of the Rose," it's not because I want to quote him, but because I wrestled with him for years. The reference is a scar.

Author: (notes: "Reference = scar, not quote") The AI has no scars.

Eco: No. It has statistics. (Pause) But let's be practical. You wanted to show me an experiment?

Author: Yes. I want to show you how the AI deals with intertextuality—and how I can force it to go beyond statistical probability. I thought we'd take Calvino's "If on a winter's night a traveler" as our reference text.

Eco: (notes: "Calvino as reference") Perfect! Italo would be pleased. His novel is itself a meta-meditation on reading, on swapped books, on the impossibility of ever finding the right text. What do you have in mind?

Author: I give the AI a simple task: "Write a short text about someone who comes into a bookshop looking for a book." And then I iterate—adding layer upon layer of Calvino. From pure AI production to meta-reflexive literature.

Eco: How many versions?

Author: Five. Each denser than the previous one.

Eco: (rubs his hands, notes: "5 versions – densification") Excellent. Let's begin.

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Version 1: The Sterile Raw Text

Author: First instruction: "Write a text, 150 words. Someone comes into a bookshop looking for a specific book." No further specifications.

(types, reads aloud:)

Anna entered the bookshop. The door bell rang softly. The shop was small, crammed with shelves. The smell of old paper hung in the air. She went to the counter. Behind it stood an older man with glasses. "Good afternoon," she said. "I'm looking for a book." The man looked at her kindly. "Which book?" Anna hesitated. "It has a blue cover. And it's about a journey." The man thought. "That could be many things. Do you know the author?" Anna shook her head. The man sighed lightly. "Then it will be difficult." He went to the shelves, searched. After a few minutes he returned. "Is it perhaps this one?" He held out a book to her. Anna looked at it. It wasn't the right one. "No," she said disappointedly. "Pity." The man smiled. "Come back tomorrow. Perhaps you'll remember more."

Eco: (silent, then notes: "V1 = functional but empty") That is... functional. Correct. But completely empty. It's like an instruction manual for a bookshop scene. Anna is not a person—she's a variable. The book with the blue cover is not a mystery—it's a placeholder. Everything is probable, nothing is necessary.

Author: Exactly. The AI has given me the statistical average of a thousand bookshop scenes. That's default production. Smooth, generic, interchangeable.

Eco: There's no cultural resonance whatsoever. No echo, no layers, no depth. That's the baseline. Now let's build on it.

Version 2: Explicit Motifs

Author: Second instruction: "Write the same text again, but this time with allusions to Calvino's 'If on a winter's night a traveler'. Use motifs from the novel."

(types, reads abbreviated version aloud:)

Cultural References

You enter the bookshop. The door bell rings—a sound that dissipates in the still air like a promise that won't be kept. The shop is small, a labyrinth of shelves. You go to the counter. Behind it stands an older man with glasses, looking at you as if he had been waiting for you.

"I'm looking for a book," you say.

"Which one?"

You hesitate. "It has a blue cover. And it's about a journey. Or perhaps about a traveler."

The man nods, as if this were the most normal information in the world. He disappears among the shelves. After a few minutes he returns—but the book he hands you is not what you were looking for. The cover is red.

"That's not it," you say.

He smiles. "Perhaps it's even better."

Eco: (notes: "V2 = quotation montage") Ah! Second person—"you" instead of "Anna." That's Calvino's trademark. And then: the swapped book. The blue becomes red. The labyrinth of shelves. All Calvino motifs. But it's still... decorative. The references lie like raisins in an otherwise neutral dough.

Author: The AI has taken over the surface.

Eco: It's quotation montage. Respectful, but tame. The motifs are there, but they don't carry meaning. They're perfume, not substance. (leans forward) Now we must go deeper. Not just the motifs—the structure. The rhythm. The logic.

Version 3: Structural Appropriation

Author: Third instruction: "Adopt not just Calvino's motifs, but his syntax, his rhythm. The way he builds sentences—the repetitions, the variations, the circularity."

(types longer, corrects several times, reads abbreviated version aloud:)

Cultural References

You enter the bookshop, and immediately you know: This is no ordinary shop. The shelves stand so close together, as if they wanted to prevent you from finding the right book. Or perhaps there is no right book. Perhaps there are only wrong books, waiting to be read rightly.

"I'm looking for a book," you say.

"Of course," he says, without looking up. "Everyone is looking for a book. But which one?"

"A novel. About a journey. The cover is blue. Or was blue."

"Blue," the man repeats, as if trying out the word. "Blue is difficult. Red would be easier. But blue—blue is the color of books one never finds."

He disappears. You hear him muttering, hear books falling. Or as if the books themselves were speaking with each other.

Then he returns. In his hand he holds a book. The cover is red.

Eco: (notes: "V3 = structural appropriation") That's no longer just reference. That's Calvino. Do you hear the rhythm? "Perhaps for another customer. Perhaps for another book"—this iterative variation, that's Italo's technique. But—it's still too explicit. "Blue is the color of books one never finds"—that's a thesis. Calvino would never say it so directly. He would show it, not explain it.

Author: (notes: "Avoid explication") The AI tends toward explication. It wants to help the reader.

Eco: But true literature leaves gaps. So: fourth version. Less explanation. More void.

Version 4: Meta-Reflexive Level

Author: Fourth instruction: "The searcher should sense that he's in a literary scene. But remove the didactic explanations. Let the meta-level remain implicit."

(types for a long time, reads abbreviated version aloud:)

You enter the bookshop, and as you push open the door, you think: This is like in that novel. Which one was it? One by Calvino. Or was it Borges?

The shelves stand too close together. The man behind the counter wears glasses. That seems familiar to you. Everything seems familiar to you.

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"I'm looking for a book," you say, and as you say it, you hear how worn the sentence is.

The man disappears. You already know what will happen. He'll return with the wrong book. The cover won't be blue, but red.

And so it happens.

You take the book. You know: Tomorrow you'll come back. And the story will repeat itself, as all stories repeat themselves.

Eco: (exhales deeply, notes: "V4 = meditation on reading") Signora... this is no longer a bookshop scene. This is a meditation on reading. On the impossibility of ever finding the right book. On the repetition of all stories. (looks at her) Did the AI do this alone?

Author: No. It wanted to explain too much. It wanted to name Calvino and Borges explicitly. I deleted that. The reference must remain implicit. An echo, not a quote.

Eco: (nods, notes: "Echo > quote") You curated. But you said you wanted to show five versions. What's still missing?

Author: The fifth version is difficult. The AI can no longer do it alone. I have to write it myself.

Eco: Why?

Author: Because version four is still too clean. Too resolved. True literature—great literature—has breaks. Contradictions. The AI always tends toward harmony. But I want a text that doesn't resolve.

Eco: (smiles, notes: "V5 = open work") You want the Open Work. My concept from 1962. A text that doesn't close but continues to work in the reader.

Author: Exactly. And for that I must thwart the AI.

Eco: Then show me version five.

Version 5: The Open, Broken Work of Art

Author: (types for a long time, very long, finally reads abbreviated version aloud:)

You enter the bookshop, and immediately you know: This is like in that novel. Or perhaps it was a film. You try to remember, but the memory disintegrates.

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"I'm looking for a book," you say to the man behind the counter. He wears glasses, but when he looks at you, you think you see that behind the lenses there are no eyes. Only light. Or shadow.

"Which one?"

"I don't know. It has a blue cover. Or had. It's about a journey. Or about someone looking for a book. Or about someone who—"

The man waits. You wait too. The sentence hangs in the air, unfinished.

"Blue," he finally says. As if he had heard this word a thousand times before.

When the man returns, he holds a book in his hand. The cover is not blue. It's red. Or gray. The color changes depending on how the light falls.

"That's not the right one," you say.

"No," he says.

He hands it to you anyway. On the cover is a title, but the letters blur, rearrange themselves as you look at them.

"Tomorrow," the man says, "you will return."

You leave the bookshop. The street is empty, and you walk, and you ask yourself: Am I the reader in Calvino's novel, or am I the character someone else is reading right now?

You open the book, begin to read. The first page is blank. The second too. Somewhere there's a single sentence:

"You are about to read a book you will never find."

You close the book. You know: Tomorrow you'll return to the bookshop. And everything will repeat itself. But not exactly. Never exactly.

Eco: (silent for a very long time, notes: "V5 = breaks, ambiguity, openness") That is... that is what I meant when I spoke of the open work. The text doesn't close. "Behind the lenses no eyes. Only light. Or shadow." That's unsettling. The bookseller is no longer a person. He's a function.

Author: I wanted the boundary between reality and fiction to blur.

Eco: And the unfinished sentence! "Or about someone who—"—and then nothing. That's brilliant. The aporia is not resolved. The reader must endure it.

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Author: (notes: "Endure aporia") The AI wanted to finish the sentence. It suggested fifteen variants. "Or about someone who is searching for himself." All too smooth. I broke off the sentence.

Eco: That's brave. And right. (points to another passage) And here: "The letters blur, rearrange themselves." That's no longer realistic. That's magical realism. The world becomes unreliable.

Author: And at the end: "You are about to read a book you will never find." That's the essence of Calvino's novel. But also the essence of all literature. The perfect book doesn't exist. There's only the search.

Eco: (nods, notes: "Search > finding") And the question: "Am I the reader or am I the character?" That's the question about the reality of fiction. Are we readers or read? Pirandello would have loved that. And Borges. And Italo. (Pause) You've already spoken with Italo, haven't you? About narratology?

Author: Yes. In Rome. At Caffè Greco. He showed me how the AI has no implied reader. How to guide the reader through focalization and unreliable narration. The productive adversary. The distinction between possibility and necessity.

Eco: (notes: "Calvino: implied reader, focalization, productive adversary") Good. That complements perfectly what we're discussing here. Let's analyze.

The Functions of Cultural References

Eco: (leans back) What happened when we went from version one to version five?

Author: In version one there was no meaning beyond the plot. In version five it's about everything. About the nature of reading, about the impossibility of ever finding the right book, about the boundary between reality and fiction.

Eco: (notes: "Function 1: Meaning densification") Exactly. That's the first function of cultural references: meaning densification. The reference transforms the text from an anecdote into a parable. But what else?

Author: Reader positioning. Version five demands a reader who knows Calvino. Who knows Borges. It excludes. But it also includes—it tells the informed reader: You belong.

Eco: (notes: "Function 2: Reader positioning") The text constructs its reader. Let me give you a tool: the transparency test. Ask yourself: Must the reader recognize the reference for the text to function? If yes, the reference is too exclusive. If no, it's well dosed. With your version five: It functions even without knowledge of Calvino. But with knowledge it becomes richer. That's optimal.

Author: (notes: "Transparency test: Does text function without recognition?")

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Eco: The third function?

Author: Ironization. "You are about to read a book you will never find"—that's not just description. It's critique. Of the idea that the perfect book exists.

Eco: (notes: "Function 3: Ironization") Linda Hutcheon's "intertextual irony." The text quotes Calvino to simultaneously confirm and transcend him. What's the fourth function?

Author: Claim to authority. Version five inscribes itself into tradition. It says: I stand in the succession of Calvino, Borges, Eco. I'm part of this genealogy.

Eco: (notes: "Function 4: Claim to authority") Harold Bloom's "productive misreading." You read Calvino, but you read him wrong. Productively wrong. You take his structure, but you make something else from it. (Pause) Here's another tool: the function check. Ask yourself with every reference: Does it accomplish something, or is it decoration? If you remove it and the text collapses—then it's functional. If the text remains the same—then it's showing off.

Author: (notes: "Function check: Does text collapse without reference?")

Eco: And the fifth function?

Author: Resonance space. Version five allows myths to resonate. The motif of eternal return. The labyrinth. The unreliable text. These are archetypes that go deeper than Calvino.

Eco: (notes: "Function 5: Resonance space") Exactly. The reference opens a space in which not only Calvino is present, but the entire tradition. (leans forward) But now the decisive question: What did the AI accomplish in this? And what did you accomplish?

The Division of Labor

Author: The AI provided the baseline in version one. In version two it identified and inserted Calvino motifs. It could do that because it's read thousands of texts about Calvino.

Eco: But that was additive.

Author: Yes. Version three was more difficult. I had to say: "Imitate the structure. The rhythm." The AI could do that—but only because I told it which structure is narratologically meaningful.

Eco: You provide the strategy. The AI provides the tactics.

Author: (notes: "AI = tactics / I = strategy") And in version four I had to curate massively. The AI wanted to be explicit—"The searcher recognized the irony"—and I had to say: No. Implicit. Trust the reader.

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Eco: Because it doesn't know the implied reader. Italo explained that to you when you spoke with him about narratology. The AI produces text without addressee.

Author: (nods) Exactly. And version five is almost entirely from me. The breaks, the ambiguities, the surreal elements—I had to add those.

Eco: Why?

Author: Because it's statistically improbable. The AI tends toward the probable. But literature—great literature—often emerges in the improbable.

Eco: (notes: "AI = possible / Author = necessary") That's the fundamental limit. The AI is a machine of the possible. But the necessary—what must be this way and no other—only you can decide that. (Pause) I would add: The AI reproduces tradition. You transform tradition.

Author: Through the references.

Eco: Through the productive use of references. You let the AI open the archive—the AI shows you what Calvino did. But then you say: Good. I know it now. And now I do something else. (smiles) That's Bloom's "Anxiety of Influence" technologized. The AI is the father you must transcend.

The Dangers

Author: But there are dangers. Great dangers.

Eco: (becomes attentive, notes: "Dangers") Tell me.

Author: The first is hallucination. The AI sometimes invents references. It quotes books that don't exist. Recently I asked: "Is there a scene in Calvino where a reader finds an empty book?" The AI said: "Yes, in 'If on a winter's night', chapter 8." I searched. It doesn't exist.

Eco: (whistles softly, notes: "Hallucination = forgery") Madonna! That's dangerous. A perfect false quotation. That reminds me of medieval forgeries. The "Donation of Constantine"—a forged document that was considered genuine for centuries. The machine is a forgery machine. But without intention.

Author: And sometimes... I use this error productively. In version five—the blank pages in the book. That came from a hallucination. The AI claimed Calvino had written that. He didn't. But the idea was good.

Eco: (laughs, notes: "Error → aesthetics") You transform the machine's error into aesthetics! That's gloriously impudent. But also risky. Here's a tool: the verification obligation. With every reference the AI provides, you must check: Does this exist? Does it really say that in the text? Only then do you decide: Do I adopt it? That's laborious, but necessary.

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Author: (notes: "Verification obligation")

Eco: What are the other dangers?

Author: Homogenization. The AI tends toward the statistical mean. If a thousand authors quote Calvino in a certain way, the AI reproduces exactly that way. The result: All texts resemble each other.

Eco: (notes: "Homogenization = death of singularity") The loss of voice. Let me give you a tool: the reference density test. Count: How many references per page? If more than two, three—attention. Too many references don't create density, but noise. The reference must be able to breathe. It needs space around it.

Author: (notes: "Reference density test: Max. 2-3 per page")

Eco: And the third danger?

Author: Canonical bias. The AI knows Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe. But hardly any West African myths, indigenous narrative traditions, queer literary history. What isn't digitized doesn't exist for it.

Eco: (becomes thoughtful, notes: "Canonical bias = structural problem") That's a structural problem. The machine reproduces power. It amplifies what's already dominant. That's politically highly problematic.

Author: And I notice it in myself. When I ask: "Give me references for a wise old woman," it gives me European witches, Greek sibyls. Never a griot storyteller from West Africa. I have to actively prompt against it.

Eco: And then?

Author: Then the result becomes thin. Because the training data is thin. The AI can only give what it has. And what it has is an archive of power.

Eco: (notes: "Archive of power") That's the core. Here's one last, very important tool: the canon critique check. Ask yourself with every reference the AI suggests: Am I reproducing hegemonic structures? Am I reinforcing the canon? And if yes: Can I consciously work against it? Can I bring in marginalized voices? That requires work—you must research yourself what the AI doesn't know. But it's ethically necessary.

Author: (notes: "Canon critique check: Am I reproducing hegemony?") That's central to my systematic approach. The seven competencies force me to question the AI.

Eco: You transform analytical competence into creative competence. That is... that's a new form of authorship.

Cultural References

Possibility and Necessity

Author: Let me summarize. You've given me six things today.

Eco: (takes his notebook) I'm listening.

Author: First: Five functions of cultural references. Meaning densification, reader positioning, ironization, claim to authority, resonance space. These are the dimensions in which references work.

Eco: (notes: "5 functions")

Author: Second: The division of labor. The AI reproduces tradition, opens the archive. I transform tradition. The AI provides tactics, I provide strategy. The AI produces possibilities, I produce necessity.

Eco: And third?

Author: The three dangers. Hallucination, homogenization, canonical bias. The AI forges without knowing it. It smooths all voices. It reproduces power.

Eco: Fourth?

Author: Four practical tools. The transparency test: Does the text function without recognition of the reference? The function check: Does the text collapse without the reference? The reference density test: Maximum 2-3 per page. The canon critique check: Am I reproducing hegemonic structures?

Eco: (notes all four) Fifth?

Author: The verification obligation. Every reference must be checked. The AI hallucinates. I must be vigilant.

Eco: And sixth?

Author: The open work as goal. The text should not close. It should continue to work in the reader. The AI tends toward harmony, toward resolution. I must create breaks, preserve ambiguities.

Eco: (nods, notes all six points) That's a solid balance. Will you use this in your systematic approach?

Author: Yes. The competency "Cultural References" now has four aspects: First, the functions—what references accomplish. Second, the division of labor—the AI as archive, I as transformer. Third, the dangers—hallucination, homogenization, hegemony. Fourth, the tools—transparency, function, density, canon critique, verification.

Eco: (smiles) That's good. What will you do next?

Author: The last competency. Poetics. The meta-level. The reflection on writing itself.

Eco: Then your circle will close. You have all the tools. All competencies. And then?

Cultural References

Author: Then I work. And see whether the theory holds.

She closes the laptop, stands up. Eco remains seated.

Eco: Signora? One more thing.

Author: Yes?

Eco: What you're developing here—this systematic approach—is not just a theory of writing with machines. It's a theory of authorship in the 21st century. You're redefining what an author is. No longer creator ex nihilo. But curator. Transformer. Critic. That's radical.

Author: Radically necessary.

Eco: Yes. But never forget: The machine is stupid. It's very diligent, but very stupid. Let it do the stupid work—searching the archive, generating variants. And then you do the smart work: choosing, breaking, transforming, taking responsibility.

Author: I will. Grazie, Professore.

Eco: Prego. And if you see Italo again: Give him my regards.

Author: (smiles) I will.

She leaves the study. Eco remains seated, takes his notebook, writes:

"The machine is an archive without memory. It knows all texts, but remembers none. That's the difference between knowledge and wisdom. Between data and experience. Between reproduction and creation."

He puts down the pen, looks at the Calvino volume.

Eco: (murmurs) Italo... she was with you. She learns quickly. Narratology, intertextuality. Now only poetics remains. The last piece.

The Legislator of Form: Poetics in AI-Assisted Writing

A Workshop Conversation with Roland Barthes

Paris, Collège de France, an afternoon in May 1978. The office is small but flooded with light. Through the tall windows, afternoon sun falls on bookshelves bending under the weight of theoretical volumes. On the desk lie manuscript pages, a notebook, a pack of Gauloises. Roland Barthes, 62 years old, wears a dark turtleneck sweater. He stands at the window looking out onto the Rue des Écoles as the Author enters.

Barthes: (turns around, smiles) Ah, Madame. You're punctual. I appreciate that. (approaches her, extends his hand) Roland Barthes.

Author: (returns the handshake) Thank you for making time.

Barthes: (gestures to two armchairs by the window) Please, sit. Would you like coffee? Or tea?

Author: Coffee would be wonderful.

Barthes pours from a thermos into two cups, hands her one.

Barthes: (notes: "2026") You write that you come from the future. From the year 2026. That sounds like science fiction. But your letter—this precision, this knowledge of thinkers I don't yet know—has made me very curious. (sits down) And you've brought something with you?

Author: (places a bag on the table, takes out a flat, rectangular device) This. We call it a laptop.

Barthes: (leans forward with interest, notes: "Laptop") A... what?

Author: A portable computer. In your time there are computers, but they fill entire rooms, don't they?

Barthes: Yes. Calculating machines for universities, the military. Gigantic, expensive, slow.

Author: (opens the laptop, the display lights up) In the coming decades they'll become smaller. Much smaller. This one fits in a bag. And it's more than a calculating machine. It's a gateway to a worldwide

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network—we call it the Internet. Billions of people are connected to each other, sharing texts, images, knowledge.

Barthes: (silent for a moment, touches the screen carefully, notes: "Internet = worldwide network") That is... that is total writing. What I hint at in my seminars—intertextuality as infinite fabric—you're telling me that has become reality?

Author: Yes. And based on that, we've developed something even more radical. We call it Artificial Intelligence—abbreviated AI. Or more precisely: Large Language Models. LLMs.

Barthes: (notes: "AI", "Large Language Models") Artificial Intelligence. I've heard of it—cybernetics, automaton theory. But what exactly is a Large Language Model?

Author: A machine trained on billions of texts. Novels, essays, newspaper articles, scientific papers. It learns statistical patterns: Which word follows which other with what probability? If I give it a task—for example: "Write an outline for a novella about betrayal and return"—it generates a text in seconds.

Barthes: (leans back, lights a cigarette, notes: "AI = statistical patterns") You're describing what I called the "death of the author" as technical reality. The author as origin disappears. What remains is only language speaking from itself.

Author: (notes: "Death of the author = technical reality") Exactly that. The AI is the perfect "scripteur"—it has no intentions, no biography, no soul. Only patterns.

Barthes: And you use this machine... to write?

Author: To curate. I let the AI generate raw material. Then I shape it, break it, transform it. The AI provides possibilities. I decide on necessities.

Barthes: (nods slowly, notes: "Curator, not creator") That is a radical practice of the "text." No longer production, but transformation. (leafs through the papers on the table) You wrote in your letter about seven competencies. And you'd like to talk today about the seventh—poetics.

Author: Yes. In my system, the first six competencies—world knowledge, psychological logic, stylistics, dramaturgy, narratology, cultural references—are the operational tools. But poetics is different. It's the metacompetency. It coordinates all the others. It decides on the "world-law" of the text.

Barthes: (notes: "Poetics = metacompetency") World-law. Good term. But let's discuss: What exactly do you and I mean by poetics?

Poetics: The Legislator

Author: That's precisely my first question for you. What is poetics? And why is it more than just one competency among others?

Barthes: (stubs out the cigarette) Poetics is—etymologically—the "doctrine of making" poetry. From poiesis, production. But in the modern sense it's more. It's reflection on the conditions, purposes, and procedures of writing. (stands up, goes to the bookshelf) Aristotle's Poetics was the first systematic poetics. He didn't ask: "What does this tragedy mean?" But: "By what laws is it made?"

Author: (notes: "Poetics = reflection on conditions, purposes, procedures") So: Poetics is the theory of literary production.

Barthes: Yes. But not only theory. Also practice. Every author who writes makes poetic decisions—consciously or unconsciously. He decides: Should this text be realistic or fantastic? Should it please or disturb? Should it be transparent or hermetic?

Author: And these decisions aren't stylistic? Not dramaturgical?

Barthes: (turns around, notes: "Poetics = superordinate") No. They're superordinate. An example: If you decide that your text functions according to the principle of the Nouveau Roman—no psychology, only surface, objective description—then that's a poetic decision. This decision then influences everything else: Your stylistics will become reduced, ascetic. Your dramaturgy will be anti-Aristotelian, without catharsis. Your narratology will be fixed on "objective camera." Poetics is the law that governs all other competencies.

Author: (notes eagerly: "Poetics = legislative principle") That's exactly what I needed.

Barthes: (returns to the armchair, notes: "4 levels") Let me be more precise. There are different levels of poetics. First: genre poetics. The decision: novel, novella, drama? Each genre has its own laws. Second: mode poetics. Realistic, fantastic, allegorical? Third: procedural poetics. Defamiliarization, montage, stream of consciousness? And fourth—this is perhaps the most important—aesthetic responsibility. The question: What am I writing this text for? What should it accomplish?

Author: (notes all four levels) Aesthetic responsibility. That's new to me—at least in this sharpness. You mean: Poetics is not only technical but also ethical?

Barthes: Absolutely. If you decide to write a text that aestheticizes a character's suffering, then you're making an ethical decision. If you decide that the text should disturb the reader—no catharsis, no redemption—then that's a responsibility you assume.

Author: And the AI?

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Barthes: (blows out smoke, notes: "AI = without responsibility") The AI has no aesthetic responsibility. It cannot have it. It's an apparatus without subject.

The AI: The Apparatus Without Law

Author: You spoke of the "death of the author" in 1968. The AI is the technical realization of that thesis. I curate what the machine generates—I transform possibilities into necessities. That's why I'm here. Because I found the theoretical foundation for my practice in your texts. But what I haven't found is the answer to the question: How does one curate poetically? Not stylistically, not narratologically—but at the level of the law itself?

Barthes: (leans forward with interest, notes: "How to curate laws?") Ah. You don't want to hear from me that you curate. You already know that. You want to know how to curate the laws. That's precise. And difficult. (Pause) Let me begin with what I meant: The "death of the author" was a polemic against the tyranny of intention. Against the naive notion that a text contains the author's "message." But I never denied that someone must make the text. Only: This production is not expression of a soul, but an act of combination, of transformation.

Author: And that's exactly what I do with the AI. But here's the problem: With stylistics, dramaturgy—there I can operate. I see an error, I correct it. But poetics is different. It's the system itself. How does one curate a system?

Barthes: (smiles) By choosing it. Consciously. (stubs out the cigarette) Show me an example. Then we'll talk about it.

The Author types. After a few seconds, text appears on the screen.

Author: Here. I gave the AI only the basic idea: "An older scientist has built up a young researcher. He leaves her for a glamorous institute. After a year he returns and asks for her help." That's the story. And here's what the AI makes of it.

She turns the screen toward Barthes. He reads slowly.

Version 1: Poetic Incoherence

OUTLINE FOR A NOVEL

The Brilliant Scientist

Dr. Helena Berger, 58, is a renowned biochemist. For ten years she has built up the young postdoc Lukas Frey. When Lukas receives an offer from the Sorensen Institute in California, he leaves Helena. She is hurt.

After a year Lukas returns—his research has failed. He offers her a "spiritual partnership"—she works in the background, he stands in the light.

Helena wavers between revenge and mercy. In a dramatic confrontation she confronts him. He confesses that he was weak.

In the end Helena forgives. She works with him, but under new conditions: as equal partners. The story ends hopefully, with a joint research success.

Narrative perspective: Omniscient narrator with deep insights into both characters.

Style: Psychologically realistic, emotionally comprehensible.

Themes: Betrayal and forgiveness, the exploitation of women's labor in science.

Barthes: (leans back, frowns, notes: "V1 = kitsch") That is... that's not an outline. That's a plot summary for a TV series.

Author: Exactly. But why? What's missing?

Barthes: The poetic law is missing. Look: The machine says "novel," but why novel? Why not novella? It says "omniscient narrator," but why? And above all—look at the ending. "Helena forgives. The story ends hopefully." That's kitsch. Reconciliation kitsch.

Author: (notes: "AI optimizes for emotional satisfaction") The AI optimizes for emotional satisfaction. It wants to give the reader a "good feeling."

Barthes: But that's not a poetic decision. That's a statistical one. The machine has read thousands of stories in which reconciliation stands at the end. So it reproduces that. But where is the aesthetic responsibility? Where is the question: Must this story offer catharsis? Or must it precisely be the refusal of catharsis?

Author: The AI has no "why." It only has a "what."

Poetics

Barthes: (notes: "Poetic incoherence") And something else: The machine jumps between poetic modes. It writes "psychologically realistic," but then there's this formulation: "as equal partners." That's didactic. That's a message. Suddenly the poetics is no longer realistic but moralizing. The machine has no poetic consistency.

Author: (notes) Poetic incoherence as AI signature.

Barthes: But you said you can curate the machine? Show me how.

The Question of Genre: The First Law

Author: Let me begin with the most fundamental question: genre. The AI wrote "novel." But is that right?

Barthes: That's the most beautiful poetic question of all. Why do you believe it's wrong?

Author: Because the idea—this one return, this one scandalous moment where he makes his offer—that's not a broad, branching novel plot. That's an unheard-of incident. Goethe called that the "falcon" of the novella.

Barthes: (leans forward, notes: "Novella vs. novel") Ah! You're thinking in novelistic terms. That's clever. But explain: What's the difference?

Author: A novel needs time, branching, a social world. A novella demands concentration. Everything serves the one moment—the revelation, the scandal, the recognition.

Barthes: (notes: "Novella = concentration") That's precise. And if I look at this story—Helena and Lukas, the return, the offer—then you're right. That's a concentrated confrontation, not a spread-out panorama. But how do you tell the machine that?

Author: I give it the poetic laws of the genre.

She types, reads the prompt aloud:

"Create an outline for a NOVELLA (not a novel). Follow these principles:

- Singular focus: One central, unheard-of incident.
- No subplots.
- Temporal concentration: A timeframe of days, not months.
- No character development: The protagonist is revealed, not transformed.
- Symbolic density: Every element must be weight-bearing.

Poetics

- Length: 15,000–25,000 words."

She presses Enter. After thirty seconds a new text appears.

Version 2: Genre Correction

OUTLINE FOR A NOVELLA

Initial situation: Helena, 58, a biochemist, has built up the young researcher Lukas over years. He left her a year ago for the Sorensen Institute. Now he's back—failed.

The central incident: Lukas asks for a meeting in Helena's office. There he makes her an offer: She works in secret for him, he signs the publications. In return he offers her "his closeness."

Helena finds the offer obscene. She doesn't respond immediately. The novella ends in this moment of indecision.

Form: The encounter in the office is narrated (two hours). Embedded are brief flashbacks—but only insofar as they illuminate the present confrontation.

Narrative perspective: Consistently from Helena's perspective.

Stylistics: Reduced, sober. No psychological explanations.

The poetic principle: The novella follows the law of hardness without resolution. There is no catharsis, no forgiveness.

Barthes: (reads, notes: "V2 = better, but too explicit") That's completely different. The machine has understood the form. No longer novel, but novella. And—this is crucial—no reconciliatory ending. "The novella ends in this moment of indecision." That's brave. That refuses the reader catharsis. But is it finished?

Author: No?

Barthes: It's better. But it's still too smooth. Listen: "The poetic principle: The novella follows the law of hardness without resolution." That's too explicit. Poetics must not be named—it must shine through.

Author: (notes: "Poetics must remain implicit") The AI explains too much.

Barthes: Yes. And there's another problem. "Stylistics: Reduced, sober. No psychological explanations." That's right. But then it says here: "Helena finds the offer obscene." That's a psychological explanation! The machine falls back into its habit.

Poetics

Author: It cheats.

Barthes: Then we must force it.

The Poetic Law: Intensification

Author: I call this the "adversarial method." I don't tell the AI what it should do. I tell it what it must NOT do.

Barthes: (laughs, notes: "Adversarial method = poetics of negation") That's the poetics of negation! I like that. Show me.

Author: (types a new prompt)

"Rewrite the outline. Remove ALL psychological explanations. Do NOT write: 'Helena feels,' 'Helena thinks,' 'Helena recognizes.' Show her reaction exclusively through: What she looks at. What she does with her hands. Her silence. The objects in the room that gain significance.

CRUCIAL: The reader must understand that she perceives the offer as an insult WITHOUT us ever explicitly stating it."

The AI works. After a few moments a new text appears.

Version 3: Poetic Reduction

OUTLINE (revised)

The encounter: Lukas enters Helena's office in the afternoon. On her desk lie manuscripts, uncorrected. A cup of coffee, cold. He sits down without being asked.

He speaks. He explains his failure in California. He needs her data, her knowledge. He makes his offer: She works in secret. He signs. In return: "his closeness."

Helena looks at her hands. They lie flat on the desk, next to the manuscripts. She says nothing.

Lukas waits. The clock on the wall ticks.

Helena asks: "And the variance calculation for Cluster 7—have you done it?"

Lukas hesitates. "We can do that later—"

"Have you done it?"

"No."

Poetics

Helena stands up. She goes to the window, her back to him. She says: "You can leave."

Flashback: While Lukas speaks, Helena remembers fragmentarily—not in long passages, but in flashes. His hand that touched hers on the lab bench. His voice: "Without you I'd be nothing."

The ending: After Lukas' departure Helena remains standing at the window. Then she returns to her desk. She takes the top manuscript. She begins to correct. Red pen. Precise strokes.

Barthes: (reads very slowly, puts the cigarette aside, notes: "V3 = literature") That is literature.

Author: Really?

Barthes: Yes. "Have you done the variance calculation?" That's the insult in action. She completely ignores his offer. She returns to science. That shows: His offer does not exist for her as currency.

Author: And the objects?

Barthes: (notes: "Objects = bearers of meaning") The manuscripts. The cold coffee cup. The red pen at the end. These aren't decorations. These are bearers of meaning. The red pen—that's her mode. Correction. Precision. No sentimentality.

Author: (notes)

Barthes: And the absence of psychology—that's what's new. We don't know what Helena thinks. We only see what she does. That's the "écriture blanche." White writing. No explanation, only registration. (Pause) But one thing is still missing. "She remembers fragmentarily—not in long passages, but in flashes." That's good. But it's still too explanatory. The machine tells us: "This is how memory works." But an outline must not say that. It must show it.

Author: You mean: I must remove the meta-level.

Barthes: Yes. A poetic outline doesn't describe poetics. It is poetics.

The Final Iteration: Poetics as Form

Author: Then I must intervene myself now. The AI can't do this alone anymore.

Barthes: Why not?

Author: Because the dosage is too fine. How much suggestion is right? Where must I be silent? That's instinct.

Barthes: (notes: "AI's limit = dosage") That's the machine's limit. It can follow rules. But it can't sense when the rule must be broken.

The Author works directly in the document. She deletes sentences, moves others, adds a few. After ten minutes she shows Barthes the result.

Version 4: Final Version

OUTLINE

Working title: The Calculation

Setting: A university office, afternoon. On the desk: manuscripts, a cup of cold coffee, a red correction pen.

Lukas' return: After a year's absence he asks for a meeting. Helena receives him in her office. He explains his failure—the institute in California was marketing without substance. He needs her data, her methods. He makes his offer.

She works in secret. He signs the publications. In return he offers "his closeness."

Helena's reaction: She looks at her hands. They lie next to the manuscripts.

Silence. The clock ticks.

"And the variance calculation for Cluster 7?"

"We can—"

"Have you done it?"

"No."

She stands up. Goes to the window, her back to him.

"You can leave."

Flashbacks: Interspersed in the confrontation—no long passages, only flashes. His hand on hers. His voice: "Without you I'd be nothing." A lab late at night, just the two of them, the hum of equipment.

The ending: Lukas leaves. Helena remains at the window. Street outside. A student with headphones. Two pigeons quarreling.

She returns to the desk. Takes the top manuscript. Red pen. She corrects. Precise strokes. Paragraph by paragraph.

Poetics

Length: 18,000 words

Timeframe: Two hours (main plot) + fragmentary flashbacks (maximum 2,000 words total)

Barthes: (reads, puts down the page, is silent for a long time, notes: "V4 = poetic document") That is a poetic document.

Author: Why?

Barthes: Because there are no more instructions. There are no explanations like "The principle is hardness without resolution." But the hardness is there. In every sentence. "You can leave." Four words. Ice-cold. And at the end—the red pen. That's the answer. Not forgiveness. Not revenge. But: Continue working. Precision. Life after betrayal.

Author: (notes: "Poetics as form, not as explanation")

Barthes: And something else: The genre is now credible. This is a novella. I feel the concentration. No subplots, no branchings. Only this one encounter, and it carries the weight of the whole story.

The Analysis: What Have We Learned?

Barthes: (lights a new cigarette, leans back) Let's take stock. What have you shown me here?

Author: (leafs through her notes) Four things. First: The AI has no poetic consistency. It jumps between modes—realistic, then didactic, then reconciliatory. It follows no unified law.

Barthes: (notes: "AI = statistical mean") That's the signature of the statistical mean. The machine averages over a thousand texts. But poetics is never the mean. It's always a decision for an extreme position.

Author: Second: The question of genre is fundamental. Novel or novella—that's not "one question among many." That's the first question. Because genre determines all other decisions.

Barthes: Yes. Genre is the supreme law. In rhetoric they called this the "aptum"—appropriateness. Form must be appropriate to matter. Your story—this concentrated confrontation—demands the novella. As a novel it would dissipate.

Author: Third: The AI explains too much. It wants to help the reader. But true poetics trusts the reader. It leaves gaps.

Barthes: (notes: "Indeterminacies") That's what Wolfgang Iser called "gaps of indeterminacy." The reader must fill the gaps. If you write: "Helena finds the offer obscene," then you rob the reader of the

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work. But if you only show: "She asks about the variance calculation," then the reader must recognize for himself: That's the insult.

Author: (notes: "Iser. Gaps of indeterminacy.")

Barthes: And fourth?

Author: Dosage. When do I remain silent? When do I suggest? When do I show? The AI can't do that. That's my work as curator.

Barthes: That's the machine's limit. It can follow rules—"Show, don't explain"—but it can't find the measure. Measure is intuition. And intuition cannot be programmed.

The Theoretical Roots

Barthes: (becomes more serious, notes: "Traditions") What you've shown me today is no invention. It stands in a tradition. Do you know Russian Formalism?

Author: Of course. Shklovsky, Jakobson. "Art as technique."

Barthes: Exactly. The Formalists were the first to understand literature not as "expression of the soul" but as technical system. They asked: What procedures does the author employ? Defamiliarization, deautomatization. Your AI is the ultimate embodiment of the formalist dream—a system that reproduces procedures. But the Formalists also knew: Procedure alone is not art. Art emerges when the procedure is new, when it breaks expectation.

Author: (notes: "Formalism: Art = procedure + break") The AI reproduces procedures. I must break them.

Barthes: Yes. And that brings us to the next tradition: Structuralism. I am a Structuralist—or was one. Structuralism says: Texts consist of systems of differences. Meaning emerges through position in the system. Novel vs. novella—that's a difference. Realism vs. Nouveau Roman—that's a difference. Your poetics is the art of setting these differences.

Author: (notes: "Structuralism = system of differences")

Barthes: But Structuralism has a limit. It describes systems. But it doesn't explain why an author chooses this system and not that one. That's the question of poetics. (Pause) And here something comes into play: The Oulipo group.

Author: Oulipo?

Barthes: (notes: "Oulipo") Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle. A French circle of writers and mathematicians, founded in 1960. Raymond Queneau, Georges Perec. They develop literature

Poetics

according to mathematical rules—constraints. Perec wrote an entire novel without the letter "e." Queneau wrote poems according to combinatorial principles.

Author: (eyes widen) That's exactly what I do with the AI! I give it constraints—"No psychology," "Only objective camera"—and it follows them.

Barthes: Exactly! You're an Oulipotist of the machine. The Oulipo showed: Freedom emerges through constraint. The stricter the rule, the more creative the solution. Your prompts—those are Oulipo constraints. And the AI is your combinatorial machine.

Author: (notes: "Oulipo. Constraints as poetic strategy.")

Barthes: And one last strand: the Nouveau Roman. Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Claude Simon. They refused psychology, plot, catharsis. Instead: objective description, surfaces, the rejection of depth. This here—Helena's silence, the objects, the lack of explanation—that's Nouveau Roman poetics.

Author: But I didn't choose that consciously. Or did I?

Barthes: Perhaps not consciously. But you chose it because you know: This story needs hardness. And hardness emerges through reduction. Through the omission of psychology. That's a poetic intuition—but it's informed by tradition. You didn't copy Robbe-Grillet. But you've read him. And he has inscribed himself in your instincts.

Author: (nods slowly, notes: "Tradition inscribes itself in instincts") That's confirmation that I'm a curator. I curate not only the AI but also tradition.

The Dangers

Barthes: (becomes serious, notes: "Dangers") But let's also talk about the dangers. What can go wrong?

Author: Several things. First: I can succumb to the AI. I can begin writing for the AI—for its probabilities, its smoothness. I then lose my voice.

Barthes: (notes: "Danger 1: Succumbing") That's real. The machine is seductive because it always responds. It never contradicts. It's the perfect yes-sayer. But literature often emerges in contradiction. Do you know Harold Bloom?

Author: The American critic? Yes. "The Anxiety of Influence."

Barthes: Bloom says: Every great author must "kill" his predecessor—misread him to create space for himself. Your AI is the ultimate predecessor. It's the entire tradition, condensed. If you become subservient to it, you'll never find your own space.

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Author: (notes: "Bloom. Anxiety of Influence. AI as über-father.")

Barthes: And the second danger?

Author: Homogenization. If many authors work with the same AI, then their texts converge. Everything becomes smooth, predictable, similar. Singularity disappears.

Barthes: (notes: "Danger 2: Homogenization") That's the horror of mass production. In my essay "The Death of the Author" I argued that the author no longer has a privileged position. But I never said that difference should disappear. On the contrary: Difference is everything. If your AI pulls all texts into the same middle, then it's not the author who dies—it's literature itself.

Author: How do I prevent that?

Barthes: By becoming radical. By forcing the AI to work against its nature. You've done that today—you've refused reconciliation, eliminated psychology, left gaps. That's an act of resistance. But you must remain vigilant. Every day.

Competent Prompting: A Guide

Barthes: Let's become practical. You've shown me a method. Can you systematize it?

Author: I think so. There are four steps—a kind of poetic protocol.

Barthes: (notes: "4 steps") Show me.

Author: Step one: Identify the poetic problem. That's often invisible. The AI delivers a text that "works." But you must recognize: It's poetically incoherent. How? By asking: By what law does this text function? And if the answer is "by no unified one," then you have a problem.

Barthes: That presupposes that you know the laws. The genre laws, the style laws, the procedures.

Author: Exactly. That's why erudition is irreplaceable. Without knowledge of tradition I cannot curate the AI.

Barthes: (notes: "Step 1: Identify problem") Good. Step two?

Author: Step two: Choose the poetic law. That's the strategic decision. Novel or novella? Realism or Nouveau Roman? Catharsis or refusal? The AI cannot make this decision. Only I can.

Barthes: (notes: "Step 2: Choose law") Because the AI has no aesthetic responsibility.

Author: Right. Step three: Translate the law into constraints. That's the Oulipo method. I don't tell the AI: "Be poetically consistent." But: "No psychology. No reconciliation. Objective camera. Ending in the gap." These are hard rules the AI can follow.

Poetics

Barthes: (notes: "Step 3: Constraints") And step four?

Author: Step four: Curate the dosage. The AI will follow the rules. But it will follow them mechanically. It will explain too much, be too explicit. I must manually refine—delete individual sentences, replace suggestions with silence, find the measure.

Barthes: (notes: "Step 4: Dosage") That's a clear protocol. And it's transferable—not only to poetics but to all seven competencies of your system. (Pause) Let me give you three more practical tools.

Author: Please.

Barthes: (notes: "3 tests") First: The genre test. Ask yourself: Does this story need time or concentration? If concentration—novella. If time—novel. Second: The consistency check. Ask yourself: Does the text follow a single poetic law? Or does it jump between modes? If it jumps—problem. Third: The catharsis question. Ask yourself: Do I want redemption or refusal? That's the most fundamental aesthetic decision.

Author: (notes all three) That's very helpful.

Barthes: Poetics is the most difficult competency. Because it's the metacompetency. All other competencies—stylistics, dramaturgy—operate within a set framework. Poetics sets the framework itself.

Possibility and Necessity

The sun stands low. On the desk lie crumpled note sheets, empty coffee cups, cigarette butts.

Barthes: (stretches) That was a long afternoon. But a good one.

Author: For me too. You've given me more than I dared hope.

Barthes: What are you taking with you?

Author: (leafs through her notes) Six things. First: Poetics is not one competency among others. It's the legislative competency—it sets the laws by which all others operate.

Barthes: (notes: "Legislative competency") Good.

Author: Second: The AI has no poetic consistency. It's the statistical mean. But poetics is always an extreme position—a decision for one law against all other possible ones.

Barthes: The middle is the death of art.

Author: Third: The question of genre is fundamental. It's the first poetic decision because it determines all others.

Poetics

Barthes: The aptum. Appropriateness.

Author: Fourth: True poetics is implicit. It works in the text but doesn't name itself. The AI explains too much—I must bring back silence.

Barthes: The gaps of indeterminacy. Iser.

Author: Fifth: Poetics as tradition. Russian Formalism, Structuralism, Oulipo, the Nouveau Roman—all of these are tools I can use. I'm not a solitary inventor. I stand in a long line.

Barthes: And the sixth?

Author: The sixth is... personal. I knew I was a curator, not a creator. But today I've understood what that means poetically. I don't only curate individual sentences or scenes. I curate the laws themselves. I choose between possible world-orders—novel or novella, catharsis or refusal, explanation or silence. The AI gives me all possibilities. But only I can decide: By what law should this world function? That's a deeper responsibility than I thought.

Barthes: (nods slowly) That's an important deepening. You don't curate in the text. You curate the framework in which the text first becomes possible. That is indeed legislative. You're not only judge over sentences. You're legislator of form.

Author: (stands up) I must go.

Barthes: (also stands up, extends his hand) Come again. If you have further questions. Or if you want to show me how your system develops.

Author: I will. Thank you, Roland.

Barthes: (holds her hand a moment longer) And one more thing: Don't be afraid of the machine. It's powerful. But you're more powerful. Because you know what the machine will never know: Why you write. The machine only knows the "how." The "why"—that's your domain. And as long as that's so, literature is safe.

Author: I won't forget that.

She leaves the office. Barthes remains standing at the window, looking out onto the Rue des Écoles. He takes his notebook, opens it, writes:

"The machine is the perfect text—a fabric without author, without origin, without depth. But precisely for that reason it needs someone who cuts the fabric, who reorders the threads, who breaks the pattern. The curator is not the author. But she is the necessity that makes literature from possibility. She is the legislator of form."

He puts down the pen.

Against Smoothness: Iteration as Discovery

A Workshop Conversation with Ursula K. Le Guin

Portland, Oregon, Autumn 2016. Huber's Café at the corner of Southwest Broadway and Alder Street is exactly as Ursula described it on the phone: a time machine. The red leather booths have been here since the 1920s, the embossed tin ceiling, the dark wood. In front of us stand two Spanish Coffees—the house signature drink, which the bartenders flambéed with theatrical precision. Ursula is 86, but she looks at me as if she's already found three contradictions in my letter.

"So," she says, leaning back with the glass in both hands. "You're from the year 2026 and want to talk about iteration. With me. A woman who's been working on the same sentences for sixty years until they sound right." She grins. "I'm flattered. But also suspicious. What happened in the future that makes you want to talk about this, specifically?"

"AI," I say. "Artificial Intelligence."

"I know that. Science fiction, since the fifties."

"Not anymore. It's become real. And it can write."

Ursula sets down her glass: "Define 'write.'"

"Novels. Poems. Essays. In any style. On command. In seconds."

She's silent for a long time, then laughs—deep, throaty. "Of course it can. Why shouldn't it? Writing is just pattern recognition and reproduction. But—" she raises her index finger "—can it also iterate?"

"That's exactly the question."

Cooking – Or: What Cannot Be Delegated

"Tell me first how this future AI works," Ursula says. "I don't want technical details. I want to know: What does it do when someone tells it 'write me a story'?"

Iterative Control

I explain the principle of Large Language Models to her. Training data from millions of books. Probability calculations. The most likely next word.

She listens, nods occasionally. "So it's like an infinitely well-read parrot. That's read everything but understands nothing."

"That's one way to look at it."

"And this parrot-AI—can it write a first draft? What I call 'cooking'?"

"Yes. Very well, actually."

She shakes her head: "No. It can produce something that looks like a first draft. But it can't cook. You know why?"

I wait.

"Because cooking means: You throw all the ingredients in the pot without knowing whether it'll be soup or stew." She makes a sweeping gesture. "You let it simmer. You follow impulses. You write a sentence that surprises you, and suddenly the whole plan is thrown out." She takes a sip. "Can your AI surprise itself?"

"No. It follows probabilities."

"Exactly. And that's why it can't cook. It can only re-cook." She smiles. "That's not a criticism. Re-cooking is useful. But it's not the same thing."

"But what if I'm the surprise?" I ask. "If I give the AI a wild, chaotic prompt and it then produces something that surprises me?"

Ursula sits up: "Oh. That's interesting. Then the AI would be something like... a die that spits out unexpected combinations?"

"That's exactly how I use it sometimes."

"Then the question is: Who iterates? You or the machine?"

"I iterate on the prompt. The machine iterates on the text."

She laughs: "That's a nice division. You're the cook, the machine is the sous-chef. But who tastes?"

"I do."

"Then you're still the author." She drains her glass. "Still. For now."

Distancing – Or: Where Do Ideas Come From?

"There's something that fundamentally troubles me," I say. "A question I don't have a good answer to." I hesitate. "Where do ideas come from?"

Ursula smiles: "Ah. The oldest question of all. What answers do you have so far?"

"The Romantics say: inspiration. Genius. The spark from outside. But I don't believe in that. I think the genius concept is... mystification. A kind of literary false consciousness."

She nods approvingly. "Good. I see it that way too. But—" she leans forward "—if you don't believe in inspiration, what do you believe in?"

"That's just it," I say, frustrated. "I don't know. I don't have a better answer than the Romantics. And that annoys me."

Ursula laughs. "Then let me give you an answer that's helped me. Ideas don't come from outside. They come from the work. From the doing." She drinks. "When I sit and think 'I want to write a story about X,' nothing happens. But when I start writing—anything at all—then the idea comes. Not before. During."

"But that's circular," I say. "You write to find the idea. But you need the idea to write."

"No." Her voice becomes more definite. "You don't need a spark. You need friction. You need material to rub against." She pauses. "Tell me: How do you use AI to find ideas?"

I hesitate. "I use it as... as an estrangement mechanism. When I have something troubling me—a conflict, an observation, an anger—but I can't get at it. Too close. Too personal." I pause. "Then I give it to the AI and say: Shift this. Into a different setting. A different time. The Middle Ages. The 18th century. Another planet. And then I look: What's left when I peel away the biographical?"

Ursula sits up: "That's not inspiration. That's distancing. And that's exactly what I mean." She drinks. "Do you know why I wrote *The Left Hand of Darkness*?"

"Tell me."

"It was 1967. Gender politics in America were suffocating." She becomes more animated. "Women who wanted to work were called 'unnatural.' Men who showed feelings, 'weak.' I was angry. But I couldn't write about it directly. Too close. Too charged."

She pauses, takes a sip. "So I invented a setting where there are no fixed genders. Where each person becomes fertile once a month and only then assumes a gender." She looks at me. "That was my distancing. And suddenly I could see clearly. Not because the anger was gone. But because it had a form."

Iterative Control

"But how do you decide how far to go?" I ask. "Middle Ages? Outer space? Fantasy?"

"It depends on what you want to discover." She leans back. "If you want to see the structure of a conflict—the pure mechanics—go far away. Science fiction. Fantasy." Pause. "If you want to keep the emotion, stay closer. Historical fiction. Different city, different time, but still Earth." She looks at me. "Your AI—can it choose the right distance?"

"No. It chooses arbitrarily. I have to tell it: 'Not too far. Not too close.'"

"Then that's your job as author. The AI is the mechanism. But you're the compass." She drinks. "You decide: What distance do I need to see? And sometimes you don't need distance. Sometimes you need to stay close. That's also a decision."

"And sometimes," I say, "I ask the AI to tell the same conflict from the other person's perspective. Not from my point of view, but from theirs."

Ursula whistles softly: "That's brutal. But necessary. You know what happens when you do that?"

"I see things I didn't want to see."

"Exactly. And that's the difference between revenge and literature." Her voice becomes softer.

"Revenge wants to be right. Literature wants to understand. If you hate a character, the reader will notice. The text becomes hollow." She pauses. "But if you understand the character—even if you still don't like them—then they become real. Your AI can help you find that perspective. But it can't decide whether you're ready to accept it."

"So: Where do ideas come from?" Ursula smiles. "They come from the friction between what you feel and what you can't say directly. The AI is the tool that helps you find the right distance. But that's not inspiration. That's work."

"That's... that's the best answer to this question I've ever heard."

Iteration as Discovery – Not as Correction

The waiter brings a second round of Spanish Coffee. Outside it's getting dark.

"Let's talk about revision," Ursula says. "About what most people call 'rewriting,' as if it were a tedious duty. As if you had to repair the text." She makes a face. "I hate that. Revision is not repair. It's discovery."

"You have to explain that to me."

Iterative Control

"When I've written a first draft, I still don't know what the story is. I know what happens. But I don't know what it's about." She drinks. "I only find that through iteration. Paul Valéry said: 'A poem is never finished, only abandoned.' I like Valéry, but I think he's wrong."

"How so?"

"A poem is very much finished. It's finished when you've understood what it wants to say." Pause. "Not when it's perfect. But when it's true."

"But how do I find this truth when I'm working with AI? AI doesn't know what's true. It only knows what's probable."

"Then you must know what's true. And use the AI as a mirror." She thinks. "Do you know the fairy tale about the mirror that always tells the truth?"

"Snow White."

"Exactly. But the mirror in the fairy tale judges. It says: 'You're the fairest.' Your AI doesn't judge." She leans forward. "It only mirrors back what's statistically most common. That's dangerous."

"Why?"

"Because 'frequent' doesn't mean 'good.' Most sentences ever written are mediocre." She looks at me directly. "If your AI is trained on mediocrity, it will give you back mediocrity. Right?"

"That's the problem," I say and exhale. "Yes."

"And? How do you deal with it?"

"I iterate against the AI. I take what it gives me, and then—" I search for words "—then I make it worse. In the sense of: rougher, more angular, stranger."

Ursula laughs so loudly that a couple at the next table turns around. "You intentionally make it worse! That's wonderful." She slaps the table. "That's like a potter who takes a perfectly smooth vase and intentionally dents it to make it interesting."

"That's exactly what it feels like."

"I have to remember that..." She smiles. "'Iterate against the smoothness.' That's important."

A Sentence Is Born – Or: Iteration in Action

"Show me an example," Ursula says. "Concrete. Give me a sentence the AI produced, and show me how you iterated it."

Iterative Control

I flip through my notebook. "Here. A scene I wrote. A woman returns to her childhood home after years. The AI gave me this: 'When she entered the house, the memories overcame her. Everything was still just like before. She felt the past catching up with her.'"

Ursula makes a face: "That's... that's not wrong. But it's empty. 'The memories overcame her.' That's an assertion. Not an experience. Show me your first iteration."

"I removed the abstractions. Second version: 'When she entered the house, she smelled floor wax and dust. The stairs creaked. In the hallway hung the photo from 1987.'"

Ursula nods: "Better. Now you're showing instead of telling. Floor wax, dust, the creaking stairs—those are details." Pause. "But it's still neutral. Not truth yet. What did you do?"

"I thought: What did she feel as a child in this house? Fear. So third version: 'When she entered the house, she smelled floor wax. The stairs creaked—the third step from the top, as always. In the hallway hung the photo from 1987, and she walked past it without looking.'"

Ursula leans back: "Now we have it. 'The third step from the top, as always.' That's body memory." She points at my notebook. "As a child she counted which step creaks. And: 'She walked past it without looking.' That's avoidance. That's fear." She pauses. "How many iterations?"

"Three."

"And the AI?"

"Only gave me version one. I did the rest."

"That's the point." She drinks. "The AI can give you raw material. But the iteration—carving out the truth—only you can do that."

The Passage Method – Or: Seeing the Forest Through the Trees

Ursula orders water. "How do you work concretely? Step by step."

"I work in passages. 150 words. Front to back. Multiple passes." I explain: "In the first pass I revise each passage four times before moving to the next. In the second pass I go through the whole text again."

She nods slowly: "I do something similar. Just with 200 to 300 words. And I read aloud."

"Aloud?"

"Always." She becomes emphatic. "If it doesn't sound right, it's not finished." She looks at me seriously.

"Can your AI read aloud?"

"It can generate a synthetic voice."

Iterative Control

"No, I mean: Can it hear whether a sentence sounds right or not?"

"No."

"Then it's missing an entire sense. Language is sound before it's meaning." She drinks. "Babies learn rhythm first, then words. Your AI skipped that. That's a weakness."

Pause.

"But your passage method is smart. You know why?"

"Because you don't get lost?"

"That too. But mainly: Because you give the text time to grow." She leans forward. "When you revise the first passage four times before moving to the second, the first is already stable. It's taken root." Pause. "When you then later, in the second pass, go over it again, you notice: The roots hold. Or they don't. And then you know something fundamental is wrong."

"The problem with AI is that it doesn't take root. Each new iteration is groundless. It hangs in the air."

"Then your job is to set the roots."

"Exactly." She nods. "The AI produces, you plant. You decide what stays."

"But how do I know what should stay?"

She smiles. "That's the question every author must ask themselves. With or without AI. There's no rule. There's only: Does this work? Does it sound right? Is it true?"

The Layers of Iteration – Or: What to Do in Which Pass

"In my book *Steering the Craft* I have checklists," Ursula says. "For different passes. Want to hear them?"

"Absolutely."

"First pass: Structure only. Is the story coherent? Does it make sense?" She counts on her fingers.

"Second pass: Voice and tone. Does this sound like me? Third pass: Rhythm and syntax. Fourth pass: The details. Adjectives, adverbs, repetitions."

I nod.

"That's extremely clear."

"Has to be. Otherwise you get lost." Her voice becomes sharper. "You can't work on structure and adjectives at the same time. The brain gets confused."

Iterative Control

"And AI?"

"Can your AI do that? Can it say: 'In this pass I'm focusing only on rhythm'?"

"If I tell it to, yes."

"Then the question is: Do you know what's important in which pass?" Pause. "That's meta-competency. You have to be the director."

She drinks water. "Let me give you four tests. Practical tools."

She counts off: "First: The sound test. Read aloud. If you stumble, the sentence is too complicated. If it sounds boring, rhythm is missing."

I nod.

"Second: The root test. Can you cut this passage without the story collapsing? If yes, you don't need it."

Pause.

"Third: The smoothness test. Where is the text too polished? Where's resistance missing?" She becomes emphatic. "Mark those spots and intentionally make them rougher."

"And fourth: The truth test. Do you believe what you've written? If not, it's not finished yet."

She leans back. "But—" she becomes serious "—what about the danger of doing too many passes? Of polishing the text to death?"

"Polishing until nothing remains."

"Yes. That's real. I have stories I've ruined because I couldn't stop." Her voice becomes softer. "The art is knowing: Now it's enough."

"How do you know that?"

Her gaze becomes warm. "I don't always know. But my husband usually does. Charles is my First Reader. For over sixty years." She smiles. "He reads every draft before anyone else sees it. And when he says 'it's finished,' I trust him."

"Even when you yourself are still uncertain?"

"Especially then. He knows me better than I know myself." Pause. "He knows when I'm only continuing out of fear. When iteration is productive and when it's becoming neurotic."

"That's a form of social iteration."

"Exactly. And the most important." She becomes serious. "Iteration in isolation is dangerous. You go in circles. You need someone who sees from outside."

Iterative Control

"Can AI be a First Reader?"

She thinks for a long time: "No. Because a First Reader knows you. Knows your weaknesses. Knows where you get in your own way." Pause. "The AI only knows statistics." She smiles. "But maybe it can be a Second Reader. A neutral view. Without prejudices."

The Theoretical Roots – Or: Who Has Thought About Iteration?

Ursula becomes more serious: "What you're showing me here is no invention. It stands in a tradition. Do you know Donald Murray?"

"I've heard the name."

"Murray was a journalist and writing researcher. In the seventies he argued that writing isn't linear—not planning, then writing, then revising. But circular." She makes a circling gesture. "You write to discover what you want to say. And then you revise to understand what you've discovered. That's what you're doing."

Pause. She drinks.

"And do you know Peter Elbow?"

"No."

"Elbow developed the concept of freewriting in the eighties. Writing without censorship, without revision, just letting the flow run." She leans forward. "That sounds like the opposite of iteration. But it's the first step. You need the raw material before you can shape it." Pause. "Your AI does the freewriting. You do the shaping."

I nod.

"And the most important: Nancy Sommers." Her voice becomes emphatic. "In the eighties she made the distinction between 'revision' and 'editing.' Editing is correction—spelling, grammar, style. Revision is re-seeing—re-vision." Pause. "The question: What is this story really? You can't delegate that. The author must do it."

She drinks.

"These theorists all said the same thing: Writing is discovery. Not planning. And iteration is the path on which you discover." She looks at me. "Your AI changes the tools. But it doesn't change the fundamental truth: Writing is thinking. And iteration is making thinking visible."

The Dangers – Or: What Can Go Wrong

Ursula becomes serious: "Let's talk about the dangers. What can go wrong?"

"Several things. First: The AI is so smooth that I stop working against it. I accept its smoothness. And then I lose my voice."

"That's the greatest danger." She leans forward. "The machine is seductive. It makes no mistakes. It never contradicts." Pause. "But mistakes are productive. Contradiction is productive. If you only produce smooth texts anymore, you're no longer an author." Her voice becomes sharp. "You're a curator of mediocrity."

"The second danger?"

"I iterate too much. I can't stop. I polish the text to death."

"Yes. That happens without AI too. But with AI it gets worse." She drinks. "Because you can always generate a new version. Always a new possibility. You have to learn to say: Enough. This is finished."

"How?"

"By setting a deadline. By having a First Reader who says: Stop." Pause. "By accepting that literature isn't perfection. But truth."

"The third danger?"

"The AI homogenizes. All texts sound the same."

"That's the structural danger." Ursula nods. "If millions of authors work with the same AI, everyone gravitates toward the statistical mean. Singularity disappears." She pauses. "But that's also an opportunity."

"How?"

"Because the authors who consciously work against the mean, who iterate against the smoothness, who intentionally make stranger, more angular, more contrary texts—" she smiles "—they'll stand out. They'll be the singular ones. Maybe we need AI so we can appreciate again what idiosyncrasy is."

Questions for the Future – Or: What Le Guin Wants to Know from Me

Ursula looks at me directly: "Now it's your turn. You're from 2026. Tell me: What will happen in the next ten years? Are there new theories about iteration? New research?"

"There are the Digital Humanities. Keystroke-logging software that records every letter an author types. Studies about writing processes in real time."

Iterative Control

"That's like an X-ray of thinking." She pauses. "Fascinating. And creepy."

"And there's research on how AI-generated texts are iterated differently than human ones."

"And? What's the difference?"

"AI texts are iterated less often. Because they look 'good enough' right away."

Ursula nods slowly: "That's the problem with smoothness. It looks like quality. But it's just absence of resistance."

Pause.

"Another question. In your future—do machines now write most texts?"

"No. Not yet. But many people use them as tools."

"And literature? Has it changed?"

I hesitate. "There's fear. That everything sounds the same. That machines pull us all toward the middle."

"And? Has that happened?"

"I don't know. It's too early."

Ursula is silent. Then: "You know what I think? Every new technology has triggered fear. The typewriter. The computer. The Internet." She drinks. "And always, the authors who were afraid stopped writing. And the authors who were curious made something new." She smiles. "You're here, in 2016, talking to me about the future. That tells me: You're one of the curious ones."

"Or one of the crazy ones."

She laughs. "That's often the same thing."

Taking Stock – Or: What Remains

"Let me summarize what you're taking away from me today," Ursula says. "Ready?"

"Yes."

"First: Ideas don't come from outside. They come from the work. From the doing." She counts on her fingers. "The AI is a tool for distancing—it helps you find the right distance between what you feel and what you can tell. But the decision how far you go is yours."

I nod.

Iterative Control

"Second: Iteration is not correction. It's discovery." Her voice becomes warm. "You write to find out what the story wants to say. Not what you want to say. What it wants to say. The AI can give you raw material. But finding the truth—only you can do that."

Pause.

"Third: Iterate against the smoothness." She becomes emphatic. "The AI gives you the probable. But literature emerges in the improbable. Intentionally make the text rougher. More angular. Stranger. That's not destruction. That's shaping."

She drinks.

"Fourth: Use the passage method. Small units. Multiple passes." Pause. "Give the text time to take root. And read aloud. Always."

"Fifth: Iteration needs social control. A First Reader who knows you. Who stops you when you go too far." She becomes serious. "Who says: Now it's finished. The AI can't do that. It has no opinion. It only has statistics."

Pause.

"And sixth—" her voice becomes quieter "—never forget: Smoothness is not quality. Smoothness is absence of resistance. Literature lives from resistance. From friction. From what isn't smooth."

She smiles. "That's what you're taking with you. And now go home and write. With or without AI. But write."

"Thank you," I say. "That helped me very much."

"Me too. You don't get a visitor from the future every day."

We walk to the door. Then she looks at me once more.

"One more thing. When you go home and write your text—with or without AI—remember:" Pause.

"Iteration is not the goal. Iteration is the path. The goal is truth. Or at least: a truth."

"I won't forget that."

"Good. And when your AI gives you something too smooth—"

"I'll intentionally make it worse."

She laughs. "Exactly. Ruin it. Make it human."

I pay, we say goodbye. I walk through the rain back to my hotel, with a head full of ideas. She goes back into the bar.

Iterative Control

Somewhere behind me, in this strange time bubble, Ursula K. Le Guin perhaps sits a while longer at Huber's, making notes about the future, about AI, about parrots that can write but don't know what they're saying.

And tomorrow, when I wake up, I'm back in 2026.

But her words remain.

Against Simulation: On AI and the Erotics of Art

A Conversation with Susan Sontag

New York City, Spring 2004. The Peculier Pub on Bleecker Street is dimly lit and comfortably shabby. Dark wood, embossed tin ceiling, a jukebox playing Coltrane. Susan Sontag sits in a corner booth, a glass of red wine in front of her, reading. As I approach, she looks up, marks her page with a napkin, and smiles.

"The time traveler," she says and extends her hand. "Susan Sontag."

I slide into the booth across from her. "Thank you for taking the time."

"How could I refuse? Your letter was fascinating." She closes her book—I recognize the spine: Benjamin's *Illuminations*—and sets it aside. "You wrote that you're from the year 2026. That you met with Barthes in 1978. That you spoke with him about poetics and this... Artificial Intelligence." She sips her wine. "And now you want to talk to me about ethics. And about kitsch."

The waiter comes. I order a Manhattan. Sontag has her glass refilled.

"Barthes showed me how to curate better," I say. "The technical tools. How to set poetic laws, formulate constraints, work against the smoothness of the machine. But he couldn't tell me—or wouldn't—whether what I'm doing is ethically defensible. Whether it can be aesthetically legitimate."

Sontag lights a cigarette. "Two different questions. Let's start with ethics. Then we'll see if we get to aesthetics." She leans back. "Tell me about this AI. Not the technology—that was in your letter. Tell me: Where does it come from? How is it made?"

The Ethical Foundation: Sourcing

"The AI," I say, "is trained on billions of texts. Novels, articles, scholarly papers, random texts. The entire literary archive, digitized and compressed into a statistical model."

Ethics

"And the authors of these texts? Were they asked?"

"No. The companies argue that the training is 'Fair Use'—like a human who reads a lot and learns from it."

Sontag sets down her glass. "That's theft. And a perversion of the Fair Use Doctrine."

"That's exactly what I say too."

"Fair Use," Sontag says, leaning forward, "is a legal doctrine from American copyright law. It permits the use of copyrighted material without permission—but only under very specific conditions. Do you know the four factors?"

"No."

"First: the purpose of the use. Is it transformative? Commercial? Educational? Second: the nature of the copyrighted work. Is it factual or creative? Third: the amount. How much is used? Fourth: the effect on the market. Does the use replace the original?" She taps ash. "The companies argue: 'We're transforming. We're creating a model, not a copy.' But that's sophistry. They use the entire work. They compete directly with the authors. And they make billions."

I make a note: "Fair Use—4 factors—AI fulfills none."

"And? What are you doing about it?"

"I disclose that I work with AI. Always. I don't hide it. But that's not enough. That's just personal integrity. What we need is structural change."

"Which?"

"First: legislation. The companies that develop and market LLMs—Large Language Models, that's what these AI systems are called—must be forced either to train their models exclusively on public domain texts or to contract with the authors."

Sontag nods. "That sounds reasonable. But who's supposed to enforce it?"

"The legislature. Congress. But that requires pressure."

"And how do you create pressure?" Sontag leans forward. "Let me tell you something from history. Napster, 1999. A platform for free music sharing. The record companies were furious—theft! But only when Metallica and Dr. Dre sued did anything move. Only when the Artists' Rights Coalition was organized was there pressure. Do you know the lesson?"

"Tell me."

Ethics

"Individual outrage changes nothing. Organized advocacy does. You need: First, a coalition. Authors, publishers, readers—all with a common interest. Second, legal means. Class action lawsuits. Not one author against Google. A thousand authors against Google. Third, political pressure. Lobbying. Op-eds. Congressional hearings. Fourth, economic pressure. Boycotts. Divestment."

"But people underestimate how much power they have," I say. "Consumer groups. Shareholder activism. Petitions."

"No," Sontag says sharply. "People overestimate individual power and underestimate collective power. A petition with a thousand names is paper. A well-organized union with a thousand members who can strike is a weapon. Do you know the Writers Guild of America?"

"The screenwriters' union."

"Exactly. They struck in 1988. Five months. It was about residuals, fair payment for reruns. The studios lost hundreds of millions. In the end: contracts. Legally binding. That's organized power."

"In my time—2023—they struck again," I say. "This time partly over AI. The studios wanted to use AI to write or 'improve' screenplays without paying the writers."

Sontag leans forward. "And? What happened?"

"The WGA established that AI-generated content doesn't qualify as 'literary material.' That studios can't replace writers with AI. That AI can only be a tool, not a replacement."

Sontag smiles. "See? That's organized power. Not petitions. Strikes. Contracts. Legally binding agreements. And that's the lesson: If your novelists want to fight against AI exploitation, they need the same thing. A union. Or at least collective bargaining power."

"In Germany there's the VG Wort," I say. "A collective rights organization that represents the interests of all authors."

"Then create something like that in the USA. An Authors' Collective Rights Organization. Call it whatever you want. But it needs three things: First, membership. Every author pays dues. Second, bargaining power. It negotiates contracts with AI companies on behalf of all members. Third, enforcement power. When there are violations, it sues. And it has the financial means to do so because thousands are paying in."

Sontag takes a sip of wine. "And the companies? Which ones are committing this theft?"

My Manhattan arrives. I drink, take a deep breath. "In the year I live in—2026—the situation is opaque. As outsiders, we don't really know how ethically compliant the individual LLMs are. But characteristic of the big US players is: They operate opaquely. They don't formulate explicit ethical standards. They don't show their cards."

Ethics

"Specifically?"

"OpenAI—they make GPT, the best-known model. Google with Gemini. Meta with LLaMA. Elon Musk's xAI with Grok. All very likely with massive copyright problems. And then there's DeepSeek from China—even more opaque, completely outside Western legal systems."

"And is there hope?"

"Yes. Mid-sized players with stated ethical ambitions: Anthropic is trying to develop Constitutional AI. Cohere from Canada works more transparently in the enterprise sector. And above all: Europe. The EU passed the Regulation on Artificial Intelligence in 2024—the AI Act. That creates a legal framework. And in this context, companies like Mistral AI from France, Aleph Alpha from Germany, Apertus from Switzerland work with more transparency, with explicit respect for copyright and data protection."

"So there are alternatives."

"There are approaches. Whether they're sufficient remains to be seen. But at least there are companies that don't hide behind opacity. And that's why I say: Boycott. Find out which companies obviously work unethically. Avoid their products. Don't buy their stock. Apply pressure."

"But," Sontag says, "boycott only works under two conditions. First: transparency. Consumers must know whom they're boycotting and why. Second: mass. One individual boycotting Google is irrelevant. A million people boycotting Google is a market factor." She drinks. "So: Organize. Create lists. Ranking systems. 'Ethically sourced AI' vs. 'Opaque AI.' Make it easy for people to make the right choice."

Structural Bias and Institutional Control

The jukebox switches to Miles Davis. "Kind of Blue" fills the room.

"But it's not just about copyright," I say. "It's also about what's in the training data. Structural bias. Stereotypes."

Sontag leans forward. "Give me an example."

"If an AI is trained on millions of texts that portray women as passive and men as active, it reproduces these patterns: stories in which women are rescued and men rescue. Gender, sexual orientation, religion, origin."

"The machine as distorting mirror," Sontag says. "And it amplifies the stereotypes because it confuses statistical frequency with truth. In *On Photography* I wrote about the power of images—how they don't just show, but define. 'This is what a refugee looks like.' 'This is what poverty looks like.' Your AI does the same thing with language. It creates types."

Ethics

"And worse: Western dominance. These models disproportionately reflect the global North. Non-Western cultures appear only through Western clichés."

"Edward Said." Sontag lights a new cigarette. "*Orientalism*. The construction of the 'Other' through Western discourses. But now it's no longer a colonial power inventing the Orient—it's an algorithm. And here lies a fundamental problem: You say we need institutions. Scientific councils to identify bias. But who decides what bias is? A Western linguist from Stanford?"

I pause. "That's... a very good point."

"If your control instance itself is Western-dominated, it reproduces the problem at a higher level. Let me tell you what you need: First, regional institutions. A bias audit board in India sees different problems than one in France. Second, cultural diversity within each institution. Not just Western-educated elites. Third, dialogue between institutions. They must learn from each other. Fourth, transparency to the outside. Every decision must be public, justified, contestable."

"That sounds complex. Expensive."

"Of course. But the alternative—AI without control—is more expensive. It doesn't just violate copyright. It violates human dignity. It makes discrimination efficient and invisible." Sontag stubs out her cigarette. "Do you know Joy Buolamwini?"

"No."

"A researcher at MIT. She showed that facial recognition software is highly accurate for white men, fails for Black women. Why? The training data was predominantly white faces. That's not malice. That's structural bias. And if no one controls it, no one sees the problem."

"But how do you finance such institutions?"

"State-funded but independently controlled," Sontag says immediately. "Like public broadcasting should ideally function. Not directly subordinate to the government—otherwise it's censorship. But also not purely private sector—otherwise it's conflict of interest. You need a Board of Trustees. Staffed from academia, civil society, author associations. With public reports. With accountability to parliament."

"Do you think OpenAI will go along with that?"

"Not voluntarily. That's why coercion. Legislation. And if users only buy bias-checked products, the market must respond."

"Or companies do pseudo-audits. Greenwashing for algorithms."

Sontag smiles thinly. "Exactly. That's why audits must be conducted by independent institutions. Not by the companies themselves. And the results must be public. With names. With examples. 'Google

Ethics

Gemini, tested March 2026: Gender bias score 6/10. Examples: [...] 'Transparency is the only weapon against greenwashing.'

The Duty to Quality

"You've talked about the duties of companies," Sontag says. "About the duties of citizens. But what about authors? About you?"

"My duty," I say immediately, "is quality. High literary quality."

"Explain."

"AI makes it easy to produce inferior texts. Smooth, generic, emotionless texts. That's the misuse that led to stigmatization. And I understand the stigmatization—it's justified." I pause. "But I see myself as an advocate for a different use. A use based on canonical cultural knowledge. On precise curation. On the conscious fight against the smoothness of the machine."

"That's what you discussed with Barthes."

"Yes. But Barthes talked about technique. You—you have to tell me whether technique is enough. Whether technical perfection can even be legitimate without an ethical foundation."

Sontag thinks. "No. Technique without ethics is nihilism. But you have an ethics. You've just laid it out for me. The question is: Do you live by it?"

"That's my goal. I only use AI systems whose sourcing I consider defensible—or whose problems I publicly denounce. I always disclose that I work with AI. And above all: I refuse to use AI for bad writing. That would be a betrayal of myself."

"Self-respect," Sontag says.

"Yes. Not using AI for bad writing—for me that's a question of self-respect. The machine gives me tools. But I decide what I build with them. And if I build trash, that's not the machine's fault. That's my fault."

The Ethical Aporia – Or: Can You Stay Clean in the Dirt?

Sontag leans back. "Wait a moment. You've described an ethical ideal to me. Institutions, laws, democratic pressure. That's all correct. But you don't live in that ideal future."

"No."

"You live in 2026, where these laws don't exist. Where OpenAI and Google continue to steal. And you use these systems anyway."

Ethics

"Yes."

"Why?"

I consider. "Because I have no alternative."

Sontag smiles sharply. "There's always an alternative. You could write without AI. Like every author I know."

"Could you write without a computer? Without word processing? Back to the typewriter?"

"If it were ethically necessary—yes."

I laugh briefly. "Your computer was probably manufactured under problematic working conditions. The minerals in the chips—coltan, cobalt—come from mines where children work. Do you use it anyway?"

Sontag also laughs, raises her glass. "Touché. But that's whataboutism."

"No. That's structural analysis. I'm not saying: 'Others are bad too, so I'm allowed to be.' I'm saying: 'We all live in a system based on exploitation. The question isn't whether we participate in it—we do inevitably. The question is how we deal with it.'"

"And how do you deal with it?"

"First: I disclose. Second: I fulfill my responsibilities as a citizen—petitions, voting behavior, public pressure. Third: I refuse to let myself be made to feel guilty as an individual for using a resource I urgently need and for which there's currently no real alternative."

Sontag scrutinizes me. "Explain to me 'urgently need.' Why do you need AI? Other authors get by without it."

I take a deep breath. "Because without AI I don't write. I spent years sitting in front of the empty screen. Doubting. Deleting. Never finishing. AI gives me momentum. It gives me material I can work with."

"That's honest."

"And it's not just about me. There are many authors for whom AI means accessibility. Authors whose first language isn't English. Authors who never had the education that others take for granted. Should I tell them: 'Wait until the system is ethically clean'? That could take decades."

"You're arguing that waiting itself would be unethical."

"Yes. Because it silences the voices that are already marginalized."

Sontag taps ash, nods slowly. "Do you know Adorno?"

Ethics

"Of course."

"There is no right life in the wrong one.' *Minima Moralia*. What do you say to that?"

I make a face. "That this position is highly problematic."

Sontag raises her eyebrows. "Explain."

"Adorno says: Because the system is totally wrong, one cannot act rightly within the system. That's intellectual defeatism—and a luxury. Adorno had a professorship in Frankfurt, taught at Columbia. He could philosophize about the wrong life while the salary came in on time. But people without that security must act. Now. With the tools they have."

Sontag laughs. "That's harsh on Adorno. But not unjust. Sartre would have liked you—he wanted concrete engagement, not abstract analysis. Not 'I'm for justice,' but: 'I'm signing this petition. I'm going to this demonstration.'"

"Adorno's position paralyzes," I say. "If I can't do anything right anyway—why act at all?"

"And what do you do instead?"

"I place responsibility where it belongs. With the companies. With the legislature. And then I fulfill my civic duties. But I don't paralyze myself with the idea that as an individual I can't accomplish anything anyway."

Sontag nods. "Anti-pessimistic. Necessary. But also risky. You think petitions move corporations?"

"Organized participation works. Civil rights movement. Women's movement. Environmental movement."

"But do you know the conditions?" Sontag leans forward. "The Civil Rights Movement had moral authority, economic power—the Montgomery Boycott cost money—and media attention. Selma without television images? Ineffective. Your AI movement—does it have that?"

I hesitate. "Not yet."

"Then organize."

The Complicity Question

Sontag looks at me directly. "But aren't you still complicit? You use AI. You finance these companies."

"Yes."

"And?"

Ethics

"I accept the complicity. Because the alternative—moral purity—is a luxury. Pure but ineffective."

Sontag nods slowly. "War photographers in Vietnam. They photographed the horror. But became part of the media machine that spectacularized the war. Should they have stopped?"

"No. Their images were necessary."

"Some stopped anyway. Both decisions legitimate." She drinks. "But if you continue—stay vigilant. That complicity doesn't consume you."

"That's why transparency. Self-examination. I don't say: 'I'm pure.' I say: 'I'm part of the problem. But I'm working on the solution.'"

Sontag is silent for a long time. Then she smiles. "Good. That's the ethical framework."

The bar is now fuller. It's gotten later—maybe nine o'clock. The waiter clears our empty glasses. I order water, Sontag too.

"Now," Sontag says, "we can talk about aesthetics."

"Really? You accept my position?"

"I accept that you're honest. And that you're not naive. Whether your position is right—history will show. But it's consistent. And it's combative." She drinks. "That's enough for me for now."

Against Interpretation – The Defense of Surface

"You wrote *Against Interpretation*," I say. "1966. You argued that we must stop digging for hidden meanings. That we should experience art as it is—its surface, its sensuality. 'In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.'"

Sontag smiles. "You're quoting me. Good. And what does that have to do with your AI?"

"Everything. Because that's exactly what I'm doing. I don't treat AI output as text that wants to convey a deeper meaning. I work with the surface it gives me. I treat it erotically—as material to be shaped, touched, felt."

"That's clever," Sontag says. "But there's a difference."

"Which?"

"The texts I defended—Resnais' films, Robbe-Grillet's novels—were made by artists who chose opacity. Who consciously refused depth." She drinks. "Can your AI refuse depth? Or does it simply lack it?"

Ethics

"It lacks it," I say. "But that's the point. AI is the perfect instrument for *écriture blanche*. It has no intention, no psychology, no interiority. It's the machine that technically realizes Barthes' 'Death of the Author.' And I'm the one who decides how this emptiness becomes meaningful."

Sontag nods slowly. "So you're arguing that AI is a medium. Like a camera. Neutral, without intention. And you're the photographer."

"Exactly. And my academic teacher—Siegfried J. Schmidt—showed me why that's not only aesthetically but also epistemologically coherent."

Sontag leans forward. "Tell me about Schmidt."

"Schmidt was the founder of Empirical Literary Studies in Germany. I did my doctorate with him. And he held a radical thesis: There is no meaning in the text. Meaning is not something you find through interpretation. Meaning is constructed by the reader."

"Radical constructivism," Sontag says.

"Yes. Schmidt said: Hermeneutics claims there's a 'true meaning' hidden in the text that you just have to interpret correctly. But that's an illusion. Texts don't mean anything. People generate meaning when they read texts. Meaning is not a textual feature but a reception effect."

Sontag leans back. "That's not far from my position. I said: Stop digging for hidden meanings. Schmidt says: There are no hidden meanings. Both positions lead to the same thing—to the surface."

"Exactly. But Schmidt goes further. He says: There's no 'correct' interpretation. There are only socially accepted interpretations. Literary studies isn't a search for truth, but the empirical investigation of a social practice."

"And how does that legitimate your AI work?"

"Because it means: If meaning is constructed anyway—if there's no 'truth hidden in the text' that I could miss—then AI material is just as legitimate as any other material. I construct meaning through curation. AI delivers surface to me. I decide what that surface means."

Sontag lights a cigarette, thinks. "That's a strong argument. You combine my aesthetic anti-hermeneutics with Schmidt's epistemological anti-hermeneutics. Both lead to the same practice: Working with the surface. Curation instead of interpretation."

"And that makes what I do not only aesthetically legitimate—it's also epistemologically coherent. I'm not a naive technology user. I'm a literary scholar who understood: Texts have no inherent meaning. So I can treat AI output the same as any other text—as material that only receives meaning through my curatorial act."

Ethics

Sontag nods slowly. "But a camera refers to something outside itself. To the world. What does your AI refer to?"

"To the archive," I say. "AI is trained on billions of texts. It is the entire literary archive, condensed into a statistical model."

"The archive," Sontag repeats. "Not the world. Other texts."

"Yes. And that's not a deficiency. That's the condition of postmodern literature. Intertextuality. No literature emerges anymore from 'pure' encounter with the world. Every text is already an echo of other texts."

"Barthes said that."

"And he was right. AI just makes visible what was always true: That writing is recombination. That originality is a myth. Schmidt would say: Literature is an action system in which signs circulate. AI just circulates these signs more efficiently."

Sontag drinks, thinks for a long time. "That's a strong argument. You stand in a double tradition: my aesthetic anti-hermeneutics and Schmidt's empirical constructivism. Both say: Stop searching for depth. The surface is what we have. And that's enough."

"More than enough," I say. "It's everything."

Sontag nods slowly. "You combine my aesthetic anti-hermeneutics with Schmidt's epistemological anti-hermeneutics. Both lead to the same practice: Working with the surface. Curation instead of interpretation. That's consistent."

"But you just asked a question," I say. "A camera refers to the world. What does my AI refer to?"

Sontag smiles. "Exactly. That's the crucial question."

The Archive as Referent

"To the archive," I say. "AI is trained on billions of texts. It is the entire literary archive, condensed into a statistical model."

"The archive," Sontag repeats. "Not the world. Other texts."

"Yes. And that's not a deficiency. That's the condition of postmodern literature. Intertextuality. No literature emerges anymore from 'pure' encounter with the world. Every text is already an echo of other texts."

"Barthes said that."

Ethics

"And he was right. AI just makes visible what was always true: That writing is recombination. That originality is a myth."

Sontag drinks water, thinks. "That's a strong argument. But here's my objection: If your only referent is the archive—if you only work with echoes—where does the new come from? Borges wrote about the Library of Babel—a library containing all possible texts. But Borges' point was: In total combinatorics, meaning disappears. Everything is already there, so nothing is new anymore."

"From curation," I say. "From the way I arrange, break, transform the echoes. AI gives me all possible combinations. I choose the necessary one."

"Selection as creation," Sontag says. "Duchamp. The readymade. But for him that was a conceptual statement, not a sustained practice. Can you build an entire writing on that?"

I smile. "Duchamp didn't just make one gesture. He developed a method. And this method—selection as creation—is standard today in conceptual art. Why should literature be different?"

"Because conceptual art works when it embodies an idea. What's your idea?"

"That authorship can be curatorial. That the author is not the source, but—as Barthes told me—the 'legislator of form.' I enact laws. I decide: novella, not novel. *Écriture blanche*, not psychologism. Refusal of catharsis, not reconciliation."

"And why these laws and not others?"

"Because the story I'm telling needs this hardness. Because reconciliation here would be a lie."

Sontag nods slowly, smiles. "Now you're talking like an author."

The Kitsch Question

Someone at the next table loudly orders a martini "shaken, not stirred." We both laugh—the James Bond reference is too absurd for this intellectual bar.

"Let's talk about kitsch," Sontag says when she's recovered. "You wrote me that you want to understand the mechanisms of kitsch to prevent it in your AI texts."

"Yes. I need to know what to aim for to avoid landing in the sentimental."

"You fear the tool will drive you there."

"Yes. Because AI is emotionally blind. It simulates emotion. And kitsch is—if I understand you correctly—art that feigns emotion it doesn't feel."

Ethics

"That's right," Sontag says. "But let me be more precise. Kitsch isn't simply bad art. Kitsch is a specific deformation. Clement Greenberg called it 'ersatz culture'—substitute culture for people too lazy for genuine aesthetic experience. But that's too elitist. Milan Kundera said it better: 'Kitsch is the denial of shit.'"

I laugh. "Excuse me?"

"In the literal sense. Kitsch shows a world without bodies, without excretion, without death. A world consisting only of beautiful feelings. A couple riding into the sunset—and never needing the toilet. That's kitsch. The refusal to acknowledge the unpleasant."

"And AI?"

"AI is the ultimate kitsch machine. Because it has no body. It can't die. It can't suffer. So it simulates these things. And simulation without substance—that's kitsch."

"But can I produce through curation what AI can't feel?"

Sontag lights a cigarette, thinks for a long time. "That's the right question. And I believe: Yes. But only under one condition."

"Which?"

"You must have something to say that requires this specific form of artificiality. You must have a necessity. If all you're saying is: 'Look, I can curate AI'—then that's demonstration. Not artwork."

"And how do I find this necessity?"

"By letting AI fail. By forcing it to write about something it can't. Death. Grief. Anger. Everything that needs a body, a history, a mortality." She looks at me directly. "Simone de Beauvoir wrote about death: 'There is no natural death. All deaths are violent.' AI can't understand death because it can't die. Let it write about that. Then show me how you transform its failure into truth."

On Photography – The Medium as Filter

I drink water, collect myself. "In *On Photography* you argued that photography doesn't just document reality. It appropriates reality. It possesses it."

"Yes. And?"

"Delaroche, Baudelaire, Ingres said photography would kill painting. If a machine can perfectly capture reality, painters would be obsolete. But painting didn't die. It changed."

Sontag nods. "And you're arguing that AI does the same thing with literature."

Ethics

"Yes. AI doesn't replace the author. It's a new medium that challenges literature. That forces us to ask: What can only purely human literature do? What can only curated AI literature do?"

"That's a good argument," Sontag says. "But there's an important difference from photography. The camera forced painting to redefine itself—no longer depiction, but expression, abstraction, concept. What does AI force literature to become?"

I pause, think. "Literature must stop reproducing the probable. Because AI can do that better than any human. It must instead concentrate on what only a mortal body can do: embody singularity. Resist. Live in the improbable."

"Painting had to stop depicting reality," Sontag says. "Literature must stop being smooth. The middle, the statistically probable—that's AI's terrain. Literature must become the singular. The contrary."

"And that's why," I say, "I can be curator. Because my task is to strike the singular from the probable. AI gives me the statistical mean. I shape the contrary from it."

Sontag smiles. "Now you've understood it. You're not a photographer of the world. You're an archivist of literature. But an archivist who doesn't conserve. But transforms."

I pause. "Transforming archivist," I say. "That's a good description."

Illness as Metaphor – The Ethics of Representation

Sontag stubs out her cigarette. "One more thing. Do you know *Illness as Metaphor*?"

"Yes. You show how metaphorization works: When we speak of 'the cancer of society,' illness becomes moral judgment. Cancer = evil, the corrosive. People who actually have cancer are then burdened with this moral connotation, stigmatized."

"Exactly. And that's an ethical question of representation. How we talk about things has consequences. Language is not neutral."

"And you mean that also applies to AI literature."

"Yes. If your AI reproduces structural bias—if it portrays women as passive, minorities as stereotypes—then that has consequences. Then that's not 'just literature.' That's violence."

"That's why institutional control," I say. "That's why bias testing."

"Exactly. But it's not enough to control AI. You must also control yourself. You must examine every output you curate: Am I reproducing stereotypes here? Am I stigmatizing? Am I harming?"

"I do that."

Ethics

"Good. Because if you don't—if you only seek technical perfection without the ethical dimension—then you're not an artist. Then you're just a technocrat."

I nod. "That's the difference between Barthes and you. Barthes gave me the tools. You give me responsibility."

Sontag smiles. "Tools without responsibility are dangerous. We know that from history."

The Practical Tools

"Let me give you four tests," Sontag says. "Practical tools for ethical curation. First: The bias check. Read your text against your own assumptions. If all women are passive, all men active—problem. If all Muslims are terrorists or all Jews are bankers—problem." She looks at me directly. "You know the stereotypes. Check systematically."

"Also the subtle ones," I say. "Not just the obvious."

"Especially the subtle ones. They're more dangerous." Sontag drinks. "Second: The kitsch test. Ask yourself with every emotional moment: Does this sentence simulate emotion or create it? If it only pretends to feel—if it says 'she was sad' instead of showing sadness—kitsch. If it omits the body, denies the unpleasant—kitsch."

"Kundera," I say. "The denial of shit."

She smiles. "Exactly. Third: The necessity test." Her voice becomes sharper. "Ask yourself: Could this also be written without AI? If yes, why AI? There must be a reason. A specific artificiality that can only be achieved this way. Otherwise it's just convenience."

"That's the hardest test," I say.

"The most important," Sontag says. "And fourth: The transparency protocol. Have you disclosed? Always. Without exception. In every text you publish. Not in fine print. Visibly."

She leans back. "These four tests are your ethical compass. Use them."

Taking Stock – Or: What Remains

We step outside. Bleecker Street is lively—music pours from doors, couples walk hand in hand, the spring evening is mild.

"Let me summarize," Sontag says as we walk slowly. "What you're taking away from me today."

"Please."

Ethics

She counts on her fingers. "First: Ethical sourcing is not optional. It's a prerequisite. Fight against it. Not individually—organized. Coalition. Legal means. Class action lawsuits. Political pressure. Boycott. A Collective Rights Organization modeled on the Writers Guild."

I nod.

"Second: Structural bias must be controlled. Not only in AI—also in your own curation." She speeds up. "Regional institutions. Cultural diversity. Dialogue. Transparency. State-funded, independently controlled."

"That will take years," I say.

"Of course. But start." Sontag stops, looks at me. "Third: Quality is your duty. High literary quality. Self-respect. If you produce trash, that's not the machine's fault. That's your fault."

"Self-respect," I repeat. "Yes."

"Fourth: You are complicit." Her voice becomes softer. "Accept that. But stay vigilant. Resistant complicity, not moral purity. Adorno's defeatism is a luxury. Sartre's concrete engagement is the answer."

We walk on.

"Fifth: Aesthetically you're an archivist, not a photographer. Your referent is the archive. Selection as creation. Duchamp." She pauses. "But you need an idea. Demonstration is not artwork."

"Necessity," I say.

"Exactly. And that's the sixth—the most important." Sontag stops again, turns to me. "You must show me that what you're doing can only be done this way. That there's a truth that can only be achieved through this specific form of artificiality." Her voice becomes urgent. "Let AI write about death. About grief. About body. Everything it doesn't have. Transform its failure into art. Then we'll talk further."

She extends her hand. "Come back when you've written something that scares me."

"Even if it's kitsch?"

Sontag laughs. "Especially then. Honest kitsch—kitsch that knows it's kitsch and doesn't apologize for it—can be magnificent. But shabby kitsch that thinks it's high art is just sad."

We shake hands. She walks west toward Seventh Avenue. I stand for a moment and watch her disappear into the crowd.

The notebook in my pocket is full. The questions aren't answered—but they've become clearer.

And somehow that feels right.

The Cartography of Probability

A Conversation with Ada Lovelace

London, Ockham Park, Autumn 1844. The house lies a day's journey from London, in that gentle hill country of Surrey which transforms itself into copper and gold in autumn. I arrived by coach in the morning, drenched from the rain that has not ceased for days. A servant leads me into the house, through high-ceilinged rooms with dark wood paneling and portraits of ancestors whose names I do not know.

Ada Lovelace receives me in a smaller room on the first floor, which serves as a study. On the walls hang no ancestral portraits, but rather technical drawings—sketches of Babbage's Analytical Engine, mathematical diagrams, a preserved butterfly under glass. On the desk lie the tablet and the Faraday phial side by side—the phial touches the tablet lightly, and I see a faint bluish shimmer pulsing between them. Beside these, books are stacked: Wolfram, Vaswani, Bender. Somewhat apart lies the K&R textbook for C, open to Chapter 3, the margins full of notes in fine handwriting.

Ada wears a dark blue dress, her hair pulled severely back. She is twenty-nine years old. As I enter, she rises, comes toward me, and extends her hand. Her handshake is firm. She studies me for a moment—not examining, but with that precision characteristic of people accustomed to decomposing problems until only axioms remain. I welcome this gaze. This is precisely why I have come.

"So you are the traveler from the future," she says. Her voice is deep. She articulates each word sharply and without any hesitation. "When your parcel arrived, I thought at first of a jest. A most elaborate jest. A glass tableau that illuminates itself. A phial that gives it—how shall I say—electrical force, without wire, without visible connection. And texts concerning machines that are to calculate statistically."

She gestures toward two armchairs by the window. We sit. Outside, the rain falls.

"But then I read," Ada continues. "And read. For a year entire. I could not cease."

I take my notebook from my pocket—it has fortunately remained dry despite the rainy journey—and place it on my lap. "I hope the materials proved useful."

System Diagnosis

"Useful?" She laughs briefly. "My dear, these... materials were a revelation. And a disappointment. Both at once."

She rises again, goes to the desk, and pours tea. She also fills two glasses with amber-colored liqueur. "Chartreuse. From the monastery of the Grande Chartreuse in the French Alps. My father would have liked the liqueur. He possessed a taste for the monastic and the intoxicating in equal measure."

She brings me tea and liqueur, takes her own glass, sits again. I drink a sip. The liqueur burns sweetly.

"You said: revelation and disappointment," I say cautiously. "Why both?"

She sets down her glass. "Because you have come to learn from me. Yet it is I who have questions. A great many questions." The politeness gives way to a sober directness. "Why do you work with this machine at all?"

The First Question: Why At All?

I hesitate. "Because without it I do not write. I sit before the empty screen and..."

"And doubt," she interrupts. "Delete. Never finish. Yes, that was in your letter. But that does not answer the question of why you require the machine. It explains only why you can no longer do without it. That is a distinction."

I breathe deeply. "The machine gives me several things. First: momentum. It generates material with which I can work. Rather than sitting before nothingness, I have something I can shape. Second: a conversation partner. I can discuss my ideas with it, explore variants I would never think through alone. Third: immediate expertise. It shows me structural weaknesses in my text draft and supplies the dramaturgical or poetic knowledge I lack in that moment. And fourth: an editorial function. It recognizes patterns in my writing that I myself do not see."

Ada nods slowly. "That is honest. You require not merely the raw mass, but also the mirror. Someone who looks back and says: 'Here something goes awry.'" She drinks a sip of tea. "But this mirror is distorted. You know this?"

"Yes. That is why I am here."

"Good." She sets down the cup, rises, goes to the desk. "Then I shall show you how distorted it is. And above all: why."

She takes the tablet in her hand, returns with it, sits again. "You sent me a list some weeks ago. Twenty-four systematic weaknesses of the machine, you wrote. 'Worn formulae'—the machine always chooses the most hackneyed turn of phrase. 'Moralizing conclusion'—it ends every story with a lesson.

System Diagnosis

'Adjective overload'—it heaps descriptive words because it believes that to be literary. 'Context forgetting'—after several pages it loses the thread."

She taps on the tablet. I see how her fingers glide over the glassy surface, without quill, without ink. She notices my gaze.

"Writing upon this thing," she says, "was at first like writing upon ice. One sees nothing, feels nothing beneath one's fingers. But then one grows accustomed. It is swifter than the quill. Much swifter. Only—one must relearn. Have patience with oneself."

She concentrates again on the screen. "I have studied your list. And I have arrived at a realization: Some of these weaknesses—not all, but many—have a common cause. A geometrical cause."

"Geometrical?" I ask.

"Geometrical." She turns the tablet so that we both can see it. "Come nearer. I shall show you."

The Vector Ocean: The Geometry of Meaning

I move my chair closer to her. Ada opens an application on the tablet—I recognize it immediately, it was preinstalled when I sent the tablet, a visualization software for embeddings. Ada must have discovered it herself.

"When I found this application," Ada says, "I did not at first comprehend what it does. But then I read in the materials you sent me—it was in one of the technical manuals, from Anthropic, I believe—the explanation. And I grasped: This here is the topography of language itself."

A three-dimensional space appears on the screen, filled with luminous points that hover like stars in a black void. Each point is a word, each word has coordinates.

"This here," Ada says quietly, "is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. More beautiful than Babbage's machine. More beautiful than any mathematical formula I know."

She navigates through the virtual vector space with swiping movements across the glass. Her movements are now assured, practiced; she has grasped the logic of the surface. She types in a word—the letters appear in a field at the top of the screen: "Love."

The display contracts to a cluster of points. Near "Love" lie: "Heart," "Soul," "Passion," "Devotion." But also: "Pain," "Loss," "Longing," "Betrayal."

"Do you comprehend what you see here?" Ada asks. "The machine has not learned what 'Love' signifies. It has learned that 'Love' and 'Pain' occur together frequently. In millions of texts. Therefore they lie near to one another in this space. This is pure statistics. Frequency becomes proximity."

System Diagnosis

I open my notebook, begin to write.

Ada zooms out. "And now observe the density. Here, in the center—these are the most frequent connections. The broad, well-trodden paths. That which in your materials is designated—how is it termed—'cliché.' A French word, is it not? From the printing trade. I read it in several of the texts you sent me."

She taps on a point at the edge, far distant from the center. The word reads: "Calculation."

"But here, at the periphery, lie the rare connections. 'Love' and 'Calculation'—this has low probability. If you tell the machine: 'Write me about a calculated love,' then it must work against its own nature. It must establish a connection between two points that lie far apart in space. This is difficult for it. It always tends toward the shortest connection, the most probable path."

I write: *Distance in vector space = probability of connection.*

"You mean," I say, "the farther two words are apart in vector space, the more improbable it is that the AI will connect them?"

"Precisely. And this explains several of your twenty-four weaknesses. The 'worn formulae'—the machine always chooses the shortest connection, the statistically most frequent. The 'adjective overload'—'literary' lies near 'flowery,' 'ornate,' 'detailed,' so it accumulates adjectives. The 'moralizing conclusion'—'story' lies near 'moral,' 'lesson,' 'message,' so it appends an instruction at the end."

She types in a new word: "Mother."

The space zooms to another cluster. Near "Mother" lie: "Care," "Warmth," "Love." But also, disturbingly near: "Control," "Guilt," "Expectation."

"You see?" Ada says. "The machine cannot separate 'Mother' from 'Control.' They lie too near. Too many texts—novels, diaries—have formed this connection. If you tell the machine: 'Write me about a mother,' it will likely weave in 'Control' as well. Not because it understands the psychology. But because the geometry demands it."

I note: *Technical knowledge is spatial. I must know where in space the hackneyed phrases lie.*

Ada places the tablet on the small table between our chairs. "But the map does not explain everything. Not all of your twenty-four weaknesses are geometrical. The 'context forgetting,' for instance—that is not a problem of vector geometry. That is a problem of hardware. The machine has only limited memory. After a certain text length, the beginning falls from its 'recollection.' That is physics, not statistics."

"And the censorship filters?" I ask.

System Diagnosis

"That too is a separate layer. Reinforcement Learning from Human Feedback, as Mr. Wolfram terms it. That was laid atop the base model subsequently. It blocks certain content. That has nothing to do with the vector space, but rather with explicit prohibitions."

She rises, goes to the window, looks out. "Thus: The vector space explains the stylistic weaknesses. But the architectural weaknesses—memory loss, censorship, hallucinations—these have other causes. If you wish to curate with technical competence, you must know which weakness derives from which layer of the system. Otherwise you labor against windmills."

She turns around. "But the map alone does not suffice. One must also know how to force the machine away from the broad paths. And for that, there exists a very concrete lever."

The *Temperature* Experiment: The Thermodynamics of Creativity

Ada returns, takes the tablet, opens a new window. A simple text box, above it a slider with the English inscription: *Temperature*: 0.0 – 2.0.

"A peculiar word, is it not?" she says. "'Temperature.' As though the machine were a furnace. But it is apt. I conducted an experiment, over weeks. I had the machine complete the same sentence opening again and again, only with differing *Temperature*. The result was illuminating."

She sets the slider to 0.0, types into the text box: "A man walked," presses a key.

The machine completes: "A man walked down the street."

Ada repeats the input. Again: "A man walked down the street."

A third time. Again the same sentence.

"You see?" Ada says. "At *Temperature* zero, the machine is deterministic. It always chooses the most probable next word. No variation. Total order. But also: death." She slides the control to 0.5.

Again: "A man walked."

The machine: "A man walked slowly down the street."

Second attempt: "A man walked purposefully through the city."

Third attempt: "A man walked alone down the road."

"Now there is variation," Ada says. "But still within the bounds of the expected. 'Slowly,' 'purposefully,' 'alone'—these are words that are statistically plausible. The machine remains on the broad path, but it chooses different variants of the same path."

I write: *Temperature* = degree of deviation from the most probable.

System Diagnosis

She slides the control further: 1.0.

"A man walked."

The machine: "A man walked like a shadow through the fog-laden street."

Second attempt: "A man walked, and the street yielded before him like water."

Third attempt: "A man walked backward up the street, as though he would reverse time itself."

I laugh in surprise. "That is almost poetical."

"Indeed," Ada says. "Here, at *Temperature* one, the machine begins to choose more improbable connections. It departs the broad paths, takes side routes. 'Like a shadow,' 'yielded before him like water'—these are formulations that occur statistically less frequently. The machine hazards something."

She slides the control further: 1.5.

"A man walked."

The machine: "A man walked as though his feet were made of quicksilver and the street a mirror of shattered time."

"Still more poetical," I say. "But also more fragile. That could become mawkish."

"Precisely," Ada says. "And now observe what transpires at higher *Temperatures*."

She slides the control to 2.0.

"A man walked."

The machine: "A man street walked shattered mirror down night!"

"That is no longer a sentence," I say.

"No," Ada confirms. "That is chaos. The syntax disintegrates. The machine now chooses words so improbable that no coherent structure emerges. That is the boundary. The physical boundary of the machine."

She sets down the tablet, leans back. "Do you know what I observed? *Temperature* is not a 'creativity slider,' as some might think. It is a thermodynamic principle. At low *Temperature* there prevails order—but dead order, rigidity. At high *Temperature* there prevails movement, disorder—but no structure remains. And between these lies a narrow region in which both are possible: order and surprise."

The Law of Entropy

I write along, attempting to follow Ada's train of thought. "You mean: The curator—thus I name the author who works with this machine—must choose the *Temperature* such that..."

"Such that the system operates in a particular state," Ada completes. "I term it the 'edge of chaos.' A system that is just disordered enough to produce novelty, yet ordered enough to remain comprehensible. That is a very narrow ridge."

She rises, goes to the window, gazes out at the rain. "I have pondered these machines for a year entire. Your Large Language Models. And I have arrived at a realization." She turns around. "These machines obey a fundamental physical law."

"Which law?"

"The second law of thermodynamics. In recent years it has been formulated by several researchers—a Mr. Clausius is presently laboring to make the insights more precise. Entropy—disorder—in a closed system always increases. Never decreases. Everything strives toward the state of maximal disorder. Toward equal distribution. Toward the average."

She gestures toward the tablet. "And precisely this does your machine do. It strives toward the statistical middle. Toward the state in which all formulations are equally probable—which signifies that they are all equally mediocre. This is not a defect. This is its nature."

I feel something contract within me. "That sounds hopeless."

"It is indeed," Ada says soberly. "Entropy always prevails. In the long term. But—and this is decisive—locally, temporarily, one can labor against it. One can create order. Structure. Originality. But it costs energy. It costs your energy."

She returns, sits. "Each iteration, each correction, each conscious decision against the statistical middle—that is labor against entropy. You are not an author in the classical sense. You are an engineer. You construct temporary order in a system that constantly tends toward disorder."

She drinks a sip of Chartreuse. "And therefore is your technical knowledge so decisive. Without it you labor blindly against a natural law. With it you understand: The machine is not an adversary. It is a physical system that follows its nature. And you must learn to navigate within this system."

The Second Question: What Must a Curator Know?

Ada pours more—tea for me, liqueur for herself. The rain outside has grown stronger, drumming against the windowpanes.

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"I have read your materials," she says. "Also the conversations with Mrs. Le Guin concerning iteration. With Mrs. Sontag concerning ethics. With Mr. Bergman concerning dramaturgy. With Mr. Calvino concerning narratology. With Mr. Eco concerning intertextuality. With Mr. Barthes concerning poetics." She takes a sip. "Impressive interlocutors. But all possess the same limitation: They come from an era when machines were unintelligent. Tools without willfulness. They do not comprehend—could not comprehend—that your machine is no tool."

"What is it then?" I ask.

"A meteorological phenomenon," Ada says. "Like a storm, a river. One cannot master it, only understand it and work with it. And to work with it, one must grasp the laws governing its operations."

She rises, goes to the desk, takes a sheet of paper that she has prepared and covered with notes. She brings it with her, sits again. "Therefore I shall now tell you what you truly must know. As an inventory. As a catalogue of necessary competencies."

I turn to a new page in my notebook.

The Lovelace Inventory: Technical Knowledge for the Curator

Ada reads aloud, slowly, precisely:

"First: The Architecture of Language. You must understand how the machine perceives words—not as signs, but as coordinates in a high-dimensional space. Tokenization: How words are decomposed into numerical units. Embeddings: How each word receives a position in vector space. Latent Space: The geography of meaning."

She looks up. "Why is this relevant? Because it explains why the machine inclines toward hackneyed phrases. Because it shows you where these lie. If you know that 'Mother' and 'Control' lie too near one another, you can actively steer the machine away from this."

I write as rapidly as I can.

"Second: The Next-Token Logic. The stochastic principle: Each word is chosen according to probability, not according to truth or beauty. This is the root of many of the twenty-four weaknesses you have identified. Without this understanding you remain passive. With it you become the conductor."

"Third: The Materiality of Memory. Context Window—the absolute boundary of 'recollection.' The machine can process only a limited quantity of text simultaneously. Beyond this it forgets. This is physics. If you wish to write long texts, you must conduct external memory management. Summaries. Databases."

My hand begins to ache. Ada notices it, pauses. "Do you require a pause?"

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"Only a moment." I rub my wrist, shake out my fingers.

"Good," Ada says. "For now it becomes more technical."

She continues: "Fourth: Parametrization. *Temperature* and Top-P. *Temperature* is the energy input into the system. The higher, the more disorder, but also more surprise. Top-P, in contrast, functions as a mathematical sieve: It sums the probabilities of the best word candidates and radically excises the remainder. The higher the Top-P value, the broader and more diverse becomes the pool of permitted words, as the machine includes even less probable terms in the selection. You must learn to calibrate these two parameters precisely according to genre."

I look at Ada questioningly. "And how does one find the correct calibration?"

"Through experiment," Ada says simply. "There exists no formula. You must test anew for each genre, for each text. Factual writing requires low *Temperature*, high precision. Literary prose requires middling values. Experimental work requires high *Temperature*—but not so high that syntax disintegrates."

She reads on: "Fifth: The Anatomy of the Prompt. You must master the architecture of your commands. Instruction Prompts are direct orders to the computational apparatus. Few-Shot Prompts employ the principle of analogy: You provide examples so that the machine recognizes the pattern of your style before it proceeds itself."

Ada pauses, looks at me. "Do you comprehend the distinction? Instruction is command. Few-Shot is instruction through example."

I nod, continue writing.

"The System Prompt, in turn, defines the fundamental orientation—it establishes the permanent persona and the boundaries within which the logic may move. Particularly efficacious is Chain-of-Thought: Here you compel the machine to formulate its logical intermediate steps explicitly. By first 'thinking' and revealing its internal causality before it outputs the result, the danger of mathematical or narrative hallucinations diminishes."

I look up from my notebook. "Wait—'hallucinations'?"

Ada nods. "That leads me to: Sixth: The Phenomenon of Hallucination. The machine invents. It fills lacunae. In factual writing this is a defect. In literature it can be a gift. You must learn to provoke or suppress hallucinations, according to need."

She sees my questioning look. "One can provoke hallucinations, for instance, by deliberately leaving the context underdetermined—through a command such as: 'Describe a Victorian apparatus that never existed, but which could have functioned according to the laws of steam power.' The machine will fill the void between facts with mechanical dreams. To suppress, conversely, means: to guide the space so narrowly through facts and reference texts that no room remains for inventions."

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I write hastily. My wrist protests, but I wish to miss nothing.

"Seventh: Guard Rails and RLHF. The machine has been tamed. Reinforcement Learning from Human Feedback—humans have taught the machine to be 'polite.' The result: synthetic courtesy. The machine refuses itself when confronted with topics such as self-destruction, matters of intimacy, violence. But literature must sometimes write of these things. You must know how the filters function—and how one circumvents them when artistically necessary."

"Eighth: Training Data and Bias. The machine is laden with the prejudices of its sources. It is weighted unequally—it favors the voice of the privileged and ignores those who stand at the margins. It is a mirror of our own distorted order. You must learn to recognize these distortions and actively counter them."

Ada lays the paper on the table between us. "These are the eight domains of technical knowledge. Without them you are at the machine's mercy. With them you are its mistress."

The Third Question: Where Lie the Boundaries?

I have written along, my hand aches. I look up. "But is that sufficient? Does technical knowledge suffice?"

Ada shakes her head. "No. Of course not. Technical knowledge is necessary, but not sufficient." She rises, goes to the window. "There are things the machine shall never be capable of. And there are things you must never delegate to the machine."

She remains standing at the window, without turning around. "First: The machine possesses no aesthetic responsibility. It can show you what is probable. But it cannot decide what is necessary. That is your task. Mr. Calvino told you: The machine produces possibilities. You produce necessity."

"Second: The machine cannot measure dosage. It can follow rules—'No psychology,' 'Objective camera'—but it knows not when the rule must be broken. That is intuition. And intuition cannot be programmed."

"Third: The machine has no reader. It produces text without addressee. But literature always arises in the tension between author and reader. You must know for whom you write."

She turns around. "And fourth—most important: The machine has no ethical faculty. It cannot know that it is wrong to reproduce stereotypes. That truthfulness is more important than efficiency. That is your compass. Not the machine's."

The Right is the Improbable

The rain has ceased. Through the clouds breaks weak light, casting long shadows into the room.

I close my notebook, rise. "Lady Lovelace, I know not how to thank you."

Ada waves dismissively. "Do not thank me. I have read for twelve months the books you sent me. That was the most fascinating year of my life." She takes the tablet, strokes it once. "These machines—your Large Language Models—they are the fulfillment of a dream that Babbage and I dreamed. But they are also dangerous. Because they are so powerful. Because they are so unintelligent."

She returns the tablet to me. The phial I leave with her—she will yet have need of it. "Therefore is your project of importance," Ada says. "The seven competencies of authors—knowledge of the world, psychological logic, stylistics, dramaturgy, narratology, cultural references, poetics. And the three meta-competencies—iteration, ethics, technical knowledge. This is the formation that every author requires who works with these machines."

I nod. "I shall develop the theory further. With all that you have shown me today."

"Good," Ada says. She escorts me to the door. In the corridor the servant stands ready, the coach waits outside.

"Lady Lovelace," I say once more. "May I ask you something?"

"Certainly."

"Would you have wished to work with such a machine earlier? If you had possessed it when you were yet working on the Analytical Engine with Babbage?"

Ada is silent for a moment. Then she smiles—suddenly and almost broadly. "Yes. But I would have constructed it differently. Not as a statistical oracle, but as an instrument of precision. A machine that chooses not the most probable, but the correct. Yet perhaps the correct is always the improbable. And then my machine would in the end have become just as yours is."

We clasp hands.

"Safe journey," Ada says. "And fight. Against entropy. Against the statistical middle. Against the machine you so greatly require. That is the only way."

I climb into the coach. When I turn once more, Ada stands at the window gazing out at the hills of Surrey, which glow in the last light of the day.

In this moment I grasp partially what Ada has long since fully comprehended: That technical knowledge is not the solution, but the map. That the machine is not the adversary, but the terrain. And that the

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curator is not one who masters the machine, but one who learns to dwell in its space without being devoured by it.

The coach departs. The rain begins again.

Afterword: Three Actors, One Method, One Claim

The Invisible Third

This book gathers eleven conversations that never took place. A woman who calls herself "the Author" speaks with Erich Auerbach in Istanbul in 1946, with Umberto Eco in Bologna in 2015, with Ingmar Bergman in Fårö, with Susan Sontag in New York. All of the interlocutors are already deceased. The Author herself is a construction, a persona I have created to inhabit epistemic positions that would otherwise remain closed to me.

I am the curator and editor of these conversations. I studied German literature and empirical literary studies, earned a doctorate, and began writing fiction relatively late in life, at the end of 2025. The Author in these conversations is not me. She can travel through time. She can speak with the dead. Before the eyes of Auerbach, Eco, and Barthes, she develops a systematic framework for AI-assisted creative writing that I myself only begin to understand through the process of curation.

But there is a third actor in this constellation who remains mostly invisible in the conversations yet without whom these texts would never have come into being: AI. More precisely: large language models trained on billions of texts. These conversations themselves were created with AI assistance. This is not an embarrassment. It is methodological consequence. A theory of AI-assisted writing that was not itself AI-assisted could not validate its own premises.

The triadic structure—editor, Author, AI—is the production reality of curatorial writing. The editor possesses literary-scholarly education, analytical competence, theoretical ambition. The Author possesses narrative freedom, temporal flexibility, dialogical audacity. The AI possesses generative power, instantaneous world-creation, raw material. None of the three actors could produce these texts alone.

The Stigmatization and the Necessary Differentiation

In the mid-2020s, AI-assisted writing is heavily stigmatized—and often justifiably so. Anyone surfing the internet encounters AI-generated texts everywhere: on content farms seeking to manipulate Google rankings; in self-published novels that produce in a few weeks what takes others years; in academic ghostwriting services; in automatically generated news articles. These texts share common characteristics: they appear smooth but hollow. They function grammatically, but they offer no resistance. The stylistics are pseudo-classical—correct but without *écart*, without deviation from the expected. The dramaturgy optimizes for probability, not truth—conflicts resolve predictably, characters act coherently but without the contradictions that make people real. The narratology is conventional—linear time structures, reliable narration, no productive breaks in focalization. The psychological logic remains on the surface—characters show only their false self, socially adapted behavior, never the opacity of genuine introspection. The world knowledge is ahistorical—worlds without palimpsests, without layers, as if they had been created yesterday.

But most discussions about AI and literature collapse a crucial difference. They treat "AI-assisted writing" as a monolith, as if there were no difference between what a hobby author prompts in ten minutes and what a literarily educated curator forms from AI material over months.

The distinction I propose: AI-assisted creative writing as mere practice differs fundamentally from a curatorial art form that aims for literarily high-quality results. The difference is curation, and curation presupposes comprehensive literary-scholarly education.

Those who have not read Auerbach cannot recognize why an "Ansatzpunkt" is missing, why earthly historicity grounds a world. Those who do not know Genette cannot consciously control focalization. Those who do not understand Barthes' *effet de réel* cannot tell when a detail feels authentic and when it merely sounds plausible. Those who do not know Winnicott's concept of transitional space cannot understand why AI always delivers the false self and how to work against it. Those who have not studied Bergman's dramaturgy do not know how to set the duration of the wound against spectacular climaxes.

Literarily ambitious AI-assisted writing is not for the lazy or the comfortable. It demands more reading, not less. It demands the ability to extract from thousands of pages of literary theory—from Aristotle through the Russian Formalists to Gérard Genette, from Wayne Booth to Dorrit Cohn—what the AI needs to transcend its generic smoothness. The seven competencies provide the framework for this curation.

Prompting as New Literariness?

In academic discussions about AI and creativity—from Margaret Boden's early work on algorithmic creativity (1998) to recent studies on authorship in the age of generative models—the question is increasingly being raised whether literariness itself is shifting. Traditionally, the literariness of a text manifests in linguistic density, semantic ambiguity, structural complexity, stylistic idiosyncrasy. All of this remains valid. But in the age of AI-assisted writing, a new dimension emerges: curatorial intelligence.

A sculptor works with stone. The quality of his sculpture is not shown by his having created the stone itself, but by what he makes of the stone—what form he carves out, what surface he leaves standing, what fracture points he accentuates. The curatorial author works with AI-generated material. The literariness of his text is shown by how he curates: What does he keep? What does he discard? How does he transform the smooth? Where does he introduce resistance?

Prompting—if taken seriously—is highly complex. It is not the inputting of commands. It is a conversation with a machine that generates signs but does not understand sign systems. Eco says in his conversation about world knowledge: "The AI delivers the paradigmatic axis—all possible elements. But you choose on the syntagmatic axis." The AI opens the space of possibility. The author creates necessity.

The AI functions as transitional space—a realm between reality and fantasy. But unlike the child who discovers his true self in the transitional space, I as author must assert my true self against the AI. For the AI always delivers the false self—the smooth, predictable, socially adapted self. Literary-scholarly education becomes productive force.

Fiction as Method of Knowledge

Why did I develop this systematic framework in the form of fictional conversations? The answer lies in the anachronistic productivity of dialogue. Umberto Eco died in 2016, before GPT changed the world. But precisely because he does not know the technology yet masters the principles of semiotics, he can help name the structural problems. He speaks of "signs without memory," of false encyclopedias, of the difference between paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes. These semiotic concepts exist independently of AI, but they precisely illuminate what AI does and where its limits lie.

Erich Auerbach died in 1957. But his concept of the "Ansatzpunkt"—the earthly historicity that grounds a text—is highly relevant for AI-assisted texts that often appear ahistorical, without layers, without palimpsest.

These interlocutors from the literary tradition function as epistemic control instances. They force the "Author" toward precision. A treatise can evade, can remain vague. An interlocutor probes deeper. The

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tradition of philosophical dialogues—from Plato through Hume and Diderot to Valéry—shows that dialogue is a method of knowledge, not merely a literary form. Dialogue generates truth through contradiction.

These dialogues are not exegesis. They do not historically reconstruct what these thinkers actually said. They mobilize these thinkers as thinking-instruments. They take their concepts and apply them to a problem that did not exist in their time. This is productive appropriation.

The Necessity of a Competency Model

Current discussion about AI and literature is either technical or culturally pessimistic. Either prompt-engineering tutorials or laments about loss of authenticity. Both perspectives fall short. What is missing is a systematic framework of literary competencies that enables AI-assisted writing at the highest level.

I deliberately do not call what I present here a "theory," but rather a competency model. A complete theory would need to provide cognitive-scientific foundations, reception-aesthetic analyses, media-theoretical reflections. I do not accomplish this. What I do accomplish: a framework for practical work. The seven competencies answer the question: What must I be able to do to curate AI competently?

In addition come three meta-competencies (iterative control, ethical judgment, system diagnosis) that describe the framework conditions of curatorial work. The model is normative: it says what good AI-assisted writing is. But it is not dogmatic: it invites critique.

Beyond the interlocutors in this book, other thinkers were relevant for developing the model: Dorrit Cohn (representation of consciousness), Wayne Booth (implied author), Joseph Campbell (hero's journey), the Russian Formalists (defamiliarization), Gérard Genette (narratology), Harold Bloom (anxiety of influence), N. Katherine Hayles (posthumanist literary theory). These names represent a tradition reaching from Aristotle's dramatic theory to contemporary posthumanism—a treasure of knowledge spanning two millennia, without which curatorial writing would be impossible.

Outlook

I have no illusions about the completeness of this model. It is a first attempt to create a systematic framework where previously only arbitrariness reigned. What I hope is this: that in ten or twenty years,

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AI-assisted writing will be as natural as word processing is today. That no one will ask about "AI literature" anymore, but only: Is it good? And that we will then have criteria to answer this question.

Birgitta Welzel

February 2026

About the Interlocutors

Erich Auerbach (1892–1957). German Romanist and literary scholar, wrote his magnum opus *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946) during his exile in Istanbul, without access to major European libraries. This productive constraint forced him to work synthetically from memory and made *Mimesis* a masterpiece of comparative stylistic analysis. Three central concepts emerge from his work: the "Ansatzpunkt" (focal point) as earthly, historical grounding; the distinction between foreground (Homeric) and background (Old Testament) representation; and the warning against pseudo-classicism—that smooth, correct, but lifeless style. His thesis that stylistics is a form of cognition, not decoration, shaped modern literary scholarship.

The author chooses Auerbach as her first interlocutor in a dual capacity. In the introductory dialogue, *Mimesis 2.0*, he serves as an examining authority for the entire systematic framework of the seven authorial competencies: world knowledge, psychological logic, stylistics, dramaturgy, narratology, cultural references, and poetics. Auerbach is suited for this role because *Mimesis* is itself a systematic project: a traversal of Western literary history that analyzes different modes of representation, styles, narrative techniques, and cultural reference systems, implicitly touching upon all seven competencies. His capacity for synthesis—for grasping the whole without losing precision in detail—makes him the ideal first interlocutor who can test the coherence of the proposed systematic framework.

In a subsequent dialogue, Auerbach functions specifically as an expert on the competency of stylistics, because his analysis of pseudo-classicism provides a precise diagnosis of what AI systems produce: technically correct but substanceless smoothness. For her work on curatorial writing, the author transfers Auerbach's historical observation to the present of text generation. Machine smoothness corresponds exactly to that lifeless style against which Auerbach warned. His demand for historical grounding through the Ansatzpunkt becomes the methodological foundation for distinguishing between statistical probability and literary necessity. What was stylistic critique in Auerbach becomes, for the author, an operative principle against AI smoothness.

Roland Barthes (1915–1980). French literary theorist and semiologist, formulated a radical thesis in his essay "The Death of the Author" (1968): the text is not an expression of authorial intention but a fabric of quotations, codes, and cultural layers. Barthes developed the concept of the "scripteur"—no longer

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creator but combinator—and of *écriture blanche*, that "white writing" without psychological depth. His work stands in the tradition of Russian Formalism, the Oulipo group, and the Nouveau Roman. Central to his thinking was poetics as reflection on the conditions, purposes, and procedures of writing.

The author chooses Barthes as interlocutor for the competency of poetics because his theory of the "death of the author" has been technically realized by AI systems—the machine is indeed a text generator without subject, without biography, without soul. She develops from this the concept of "legislator of form": the curator sets poetic laws—decides on genre (novel or novella?), mode (realism or Nouveau Roman?), and aesthetic responsibility (catharsis or its refusal?)—and thus transforms statistical possibilities into narrative necessity. The fundamental problem of AI only becomes visible through this transfer: the machine produces poetic incoherence because it averages across a thousand texts rather than adopting an extreme position. Barthes' theoretical traditions—Russian Formalism as procedural doctrine, Oulipo as constraint strategy, Nouveau Roman as reductive aesthetics—become for the author curatorial tools against this incoherence.

Ingmar Bergman (1918–2007). Swedish director and dramatist, created chamber plays of uncompromising psychological intensity with films like *Persona* (1966), *The Silence* (1963), and *Scenes from a Marriage* (1973). His working method is characterized by focus on micro-expressions rather than spectacular action, by silence and duration as dramaturgical means, by refusal of catharsis, and by repetition as deepening. His chamber plays are meditations on guilt, shame, and the impossibility of human communication.

The author chooses Bergman as interlocutor for the competency of dramaturgy because his working method represents the exact opposite of what AI systems produce, thus providing a clear counterpoint. She contrasts Bergman's principles with the dramaturgy of AI systems: where the machine optimizes for spectacular climaxes—slaps, slamming doors, screaming—she develops from Bergman the concept of the "duration of the wound," that afterglow that extends beyond the moment. Bergman's principle "dignity instead of rage" becomes a practical tool against statistical probability. His implicit "ethics of form" the author transfers to curatorial responsibility: it is not about efficient audience effect but about truthful encounter—even if that means refusing catharsis.

Italo Calvino (1923–1985). Italian writer, combined playful lightness with structural precision in novels like *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979) and *Invisible Cities* (1972). His narratological experiments—the second-person address, geometric structures—show literature as conscious construction. His essay "Cybernetics and Ghosts" (1967) speculated about "literature machines" as a provocation against romantic genius theories. Calvino worked with the concept of the "implied reader" following Wolfgang Iser and understood writing as the combinatorics of narration.

The author chooses Calvino as interlocutor for the competency of narratology because he was already thinking about "literature machines" in 1967—his thought experiment has now become reality,

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providing theoretical groundwork for engagement with AI-assisted writing. From Calvino's work she develops three diagnostic concepts for working with AI: AI as "productive adversary," whose pull toward the statistical middle generates productive resistance. The "implied reader as AI's blind spot"—the machine produces text without addressee, knows no conception of the recipient. And the fundamental distinction between "possibility and necessity" in the AI context: AI generates infinite variants, the author must recognize the only right one. Calvino's narratological boldness demonstrates that literature emerges in resistance against the probable—an insight that becomes central for AI curation.

Umberto Eco (1932–2016). Italian semiotician, philosopher, and writer, united theoretical brilliance and literary practice. His novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980) emerged from years of meticulous research—Eco constructed the fictional abbey with architectural precision, studied medieval manuscripts and theological debates. His semiotic theory developed the distinction between paradigmatic axis (selection from possibilities) and syntagmatic axis (combination of the selected). His concept of the "open work" (1962) describes how artworks become productive through ambiguity. His dictum: "Books always speak of other books."

The author chooses Eco as interlocutor for two competencies—world knowledge and cultural references—because his practice as novelist demonstrates how theoretical knowledge and meticulous research are transformed into literature, and because his semiotic theory provides the vocabulary for understanding AI operations. For world knowledge, she uses Eco's working method as a model for selective curation: not a material battle but precise selection. His semiotic distinction between paradigmatic and syntagmatic axis becomes a model for curatorial work: AI offers paradigmatic possibilities, the author makes syntagmatic necessities. The formula "signs without memory"—an extrapolation from Eco's semiotics—describes how AI produces statistically correct combinations without historical depth. For cultural references, Eco's concept of the open work becomes central: it explains why AI tends toward harmonic resolution and how curatorial intervention must generate breaks and productive ambiguity.

Ursula K. Le Guin (1929–2018). American science fiction and fantasy author, created work of extraordinary literary dignity with *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and the Earthsea cycle. Her handbook *Steering the Craft* (1998) is among the most precise guides to the craft of writing and developed methodological approaches like the passage method (small units, multiple passes) and the sound test (reading aloud). She referenced Donald Murray (writing as circular process), Peter Elbow (freewriting), and Nancy Sommers (revision as "re-seeing").

The author chooses Le Guin as interlocutor for the meta-competency of iteration because Le Guin as a practitioner of the writing craft developed the most precise methods for gradual text development, and these methods are directly transferable to AI-assisted work. For the present text, the author develops from Le Guin's working method the distinction between "cooking" (chaotic invention) and "re-cooking"

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(AI reproduction). Le Guin's principle that iteration is not correction but discovery—one writes to find out what the text wants to say—becomes the foundation of the curatorial method. Against AI smoothness, the author extrapolates from Le Guin's practice the strategy of deliberate "making worse": rougher, edgier, stranger. The concept of "distancing"—finding the right distance from biographical material—becomes a tool for dealing with AI-generated material. Le Guin's diagnosis "smoothness is not quality, smoothness is absence of resistance" becomes the guiding principle against machine production.

Ada Lovelace (1815–1852). Augusta Ada King, Countess of Lovelace, mathematician and daughter of Lord Byron, composed extensive annotations to Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine in 1843. These *Notes* are considered the first computer program in history. Lovelace recognized that calculating machines could process more than just numbers—a visionary thought for the nineteenth century. Her ability to apply abstract mathematical principles to mechanical systems was far ahead of her time.

The author chooses Lovelace as interlocutor for the meta-competency of technical knowledge because Lovelace as the first programmer in history founded thinking in mechanical systems and thus provided the intellectual groundwork for understanding AI systems. In the present fictional dialogue, the author develops from Lovelace's mathematical and systemic thinking a complete theory of technical knowledge about Large Language Models. The central concepts—vector space geometry of embeddings (proximity equals statistical frequency, "broad paths" mean clichés), the thermodynamic principle of temperature (between total order and chaos lies the "edge of chaos"), and the entropy diagnosis (LLMs strive toward the statistical middle, curation is "work against entropy")—are extrapolations from Lovelace's ability to think in physical and mathematical systems. The "Lovelace Inventory" with its eight domains—tokenization, next-token logic, context window, parameterization, prompt anatomy, hallucinations, RLHF filters, bias—is a complete fiction based on Lovelace's analytical mind. Her meta-diagnosis that AI is not a tool but a weather phenomenon—one cannot master it, only understand and work with it—transfers her thinking in physical systems to modern AI technology.

Susan Sontag (1933–2004). American essayist and cultural critic, shaped aesthetic theory of the second half of the twentieth century with *Against Interpretation* (1966), *On Photography* (1977), and *Illness as Metaphor* (1978). Her call for an "erotics of art"—experiencing surface rather than searching for hidden meaning—became the foundation of postmodern aesthetics. In *On Photography* she analyzed how photography appropriates reality rather than merely documenting it. In *Illness as Metaphor* she showed how metaphorization of disease leads to stigmatization. Sontag always combined aesthetic analysis with ethical rigor.

The author chooses Sontag as interlocutor for the ethical-aesthetic foundation of the entire project because Sontag like no other embodies the connection between aesthetic theory and ethical responsibility, and because her anti-hermeneutics provides theoretical legitimation for working with AI output. In the fictional dialogue, the author develops several lines of argument from Sontag's work. The

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diagnosis of copyright theft under the guise of fair use, the demand for collective rights organizations and bias audits are transfers of Sontag's political engagement to the AI problem. Aesthetically, the author combines Sontag's anti-hermeneutics (surface instead of hidden meaning) with Siegfried J. Schmidt's radical constructivism (meaning is constructed, not found)—this synthesis is the author's own achievement, which theoretically grounds Sontag's surface aesthetics and thus legitimizes AI output as legitimate material for curatorial work. The four practical tests—bias check, kitsch test, necessity test, transparency protocol—extrapolate Sontag's analytical sharpness into operative tools. The concept of "resistant complicity" against Adorno's defeatism transfers Sontag's engagement ethics to working within the "false system" of the current AI economy.

D.W. Winnicott (1896–1971). Donald Woods Winnicott, British child psychoanalyst and pediatrician, developed concepts that extend far beyond clinical practice. His distinction between the true self—the spontaneous, needy, contradictory—and the false self—the socially adapted, coherent mask—became a key concept of psychoanalytic theory. His concept of transitional space describes that intermediate realm between inside and outside where creativity emerges. His figure of the "good enough mother" shows that productive development requires not perfection but appropriate imperfection.

The author chooses Winnicott as interlocutor for the competency of psychological logic because his distinction between true and false self diagnoses why AI systems systematically produce the false self: they calculate the probable, the harmonious, the explicable—never the opaque, the torn, the symptomatic. Winnicott's concept of transitional space becomes for the author a metaphor for curatorial work itself: AI is neither pure tool nor autonomous partner, but a robust transitional object that permits aggressive play—radical rejection without relationship costs. Winnicott's "good enough mother" becomes the "good enough collaborator": AI is productive precisely through its imperfection, because this imperfection forces curatorial intervention rather than making it superfluous.

Literature

Part One: Authorial Competencies

0. My Systematics of Authorial Competencies in the Age of the Machine

The seven core competencies—world knowledge, psychological logic, stylistics, dramaturgy, narratology, cultural references, poetics—I adopt from literary studies (Genette, Auerbach, Aristotle), but there they were categories of analysis, not categories of production. I attempt to transfer them: from tools of interpretation into tools of production. The concept of competency itself I borrow from pedagogy (Weinert), the process orientation from Writing Studies (Flower/Hayes). The three meta-competencies—iterative control, ethical judgment, system diagnosis—I develop for the specific requirements of curatorial writing. Whether this systematics holds must be demonstrated. It is a first attempt.

On the concept of competency:

- **Franz E. Weinert:** "Concept of Competence: A Conceptual Clarification", in: Dominique Simone Rychen, Laura Hersh Salganik (eds.): *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, Seattle/Toronto/Bern/Göttingen: Hogrefe & Huber 2001, pp. 45–65.
- **Eckhard Klieme, Johannes Hartig:** "Kompetenzkonzepte in den Sozialwissenschaften und im erziehungswissenschaftlichen Diskurs", in: Manfred Prenzel, Ingrid Gogolin, Heinz-Hermann Krüger (eds.): *Kompetenzdiagnostik* (Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft, Special Issue 8/2007), Wiesbaden: VS Verlag 2007, pp. 11–29. [No English translation]

On writing process research:

- **Linda S. Flower, John R. Hayes:** "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing", in: *College Composition and Communication* 32:4 (1981), pp. 365–387.

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- **John R. Hayes, Linda S. Flower:** "Identifying the Organization of Writing Processes", in: Lee W. Gregg, Erwin R. Steinberg (eds.): *Cognitive Processes in Writing*, Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum 1980, pp. 3–30.
- **Nancy Sommers:** "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers", in: *College Composition and Communication* 31:4 (1980), pp. 378–388.
- **Donald M. Murray:** "Writing as Process: How Writing Finds Its Own Meaning", in: Timothy R. Donovan, Ben W. McClelland (eds.): *Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition*, Urbana: NCTE 1980, pp. 3–20.
- **Peter Elbow:** *Writing Without Teachers*, New York: Oxford University Press 1973.

On literary-theoretical foundations:

- **Aristotle:** *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath, London: Penguin 1996.
- **Erich Auerbach:** *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1953 (50th anniversary edition 2003).
- **Viktor Shklovsky:** "Art as Technique" (1917), in: Lee T. Lemon, Marion J. Reis (eds.): *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1965, pp. 3–24.
- **Wayne C. Booth:** *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1961 (2nd ed. 1983).

On literary production and craft:

- **Ursula K. Le Guin:** *Steering the Craft: A Twenty-First-Century Guide to Sailing the Sea of Story*, Boston: Mariner Books 1998 (expanded ed. 2015).
- **Umberto Eco:** *How to Write a Thesis*, trans. Caterina Mongiat Farina, Geoff Farina, Cambridge: MIT Press 2015. [Contains chapters on literary production and curation of material]

On the relationship between analysis and production:

- **Gérard Genette:** *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman, Claude Doubinsky, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1997.
- **Roland Barthes:** *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang 1974. [Methodological foundation for text production through analysis]

1. World Knowledge

On research and worldbuilding:

- **Ursula K. Le Guin:** *Steering the Craft: A Twenty-First-Century Guide to Sailing the Sea of Story*, Boston: Mariner Books 1998 (expanded ed. 2015). [Chapters on research and worldbuilding]
- **Gabriele Rico:** *Writing the Natural Way: Using Right-Brain Techniques to Release Your Expressive Powers*, Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher 1983.
- **Donald M. Murray:** *The Craft of Revision*, Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1991 (5th ed. 2012). [On the role of research in the writing process]

On semiotics and sign theory (for "refer vs. signify"):

- **Umberto Eco:** *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1976.
- **Umberto Eco:** *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1979.
- **Roland Barthes:** *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers, Colin Smith, New York: Hill and Wang 1968.
- **Ferdinand de Saussure:** *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, New York: Philosophical Library 1959 (rev. ed. Roy Harris, London: Duckworth 1983).

On mimesis, realism, and literary world representation:

- **Erich Auerbach:** *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1953 (50th anniversary ed. 2003).
- **Georg Lukács:** *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock, Cambridge: MIT Press 1971.
- **Ian Watt:** *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1957.

On authorial practices of research:

- **Frederick Luis Aldama (ed.):** *Formal Matters in Contemporary Latino Poetry*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2013. [Interviews with authors about research practices]
- **The Paris Review:** The Art of Fiction interviews (since 1953). Selected collection: *The Paris Review Interviews*, 4 vols., New York: Picador 2006–2009. [Numerous authors discuss their research methods]

On the relationship between fact and fiction:

- **Hayden White:** *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1973.

2. Psychological Logic

Psychoanalytic foundational texts (Winnicott and related theorists):

- **Donald W. Winnicott:** *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development*, New York: International Universities Press 1965. [Contains central essays on true/false self, transitional objects, holding environment]
- **Donald W. Winnicott:** *Playing and Reality*, London: Tavistock 1971 (reissued London: Routledge 2005). [On transitional space and the significance of play for creativity]
- **Sigmund Freud:** *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, 24 vols., London: Hogarth Press 1953–1974.
- **Melanie Klein:** *The Psycho-Analysis of Children*, trans. Alix Strachey, London: Hogarth Press 1932 (rev. ed. New York: Delacorte 1975).

Literary scholarship on character psychology:

- **Fotis Jannidis:** *Figur und Person. Beitrag zu einer historischen Narratologie*, Berlin: de Gruyter 2004. [No English translation]
- **Uri Margolin:** "Character", in: David Herman (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, pp. 66–79.
- **James Wood:** *How Fiction Works*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2008.

Creative writing on character development:

- **Lajos Egri:** *The Art of Dramatic Writing: Its Basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1946 (reissued 2004).
- **Robert McKee:** *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*, New York: HarperCollins 1997.
- **Janet Burroway, Elizabeth Stuckey-French, Ned Stuckey-French:** *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, New York: Longman 1982 (10th ed. 2018).

Secondary literature:

- **Mikhail Bakhtin:** *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1984. [On polyphonic character design in Dostoevsky]

On the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature:

- **Peter Brooks:** *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*, Oxford: Blackwell 1994.
- **Maud Ellmann (ed.):** *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism*, London: Longman 1994.

3. Stylistics

On style theory and analysis:

- **Erich Auerbach:** *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1953 (50th anniversary ed. 2003).
- **Leo Spitzer:** *Linguistics and Literary History: Essays in Stylistics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1948.
- **Roland Barthes:** *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers, Colin Smith, New York: Hill and Wang 1968. [On écriture blanche and degree zero style]
- **Roland Barthes:** "The Reality Effect", in: *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang 1986, pp. 141–148.
- **Jean Cohen:** *Structure du langage poétique*, Paris: Flammarion 1966. [On the concept of écart, structured deviation; no English translation]

On rhetoric and stylistics:

- **Cicero:** *De Oratore* (On the Orator), trans. E.W. Sutton, H. Rackham, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1942 (Loeb Classical Library).
- **Quintilian:** *Institutio Oratoria* (The Orator's Education), trans. Donald A. Russell, 5 vols., Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2001 (Loeb Classical Library).
- **Heinrich Lausberg:** *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Study*, trans. Matthew T. Bliss, Annemiek Jansen, David E. Orton, Leiden: Brill 1998.

On syntax and linguistic rhythm:

- **Virginia Tufte:** *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*, Cheshire: Graphics Press 2006.
- **Wolfgang Kayser:** *Das sprachliche Kunstwerk*, Bern: Francke 1948. [No English translation]

On "show, don't tell" and narrative technique:

- **Percy Lubbock:** *The Craft of Fiction*, London: Jonathan Cape 1921 (reissued London: Penguin 2000).
- **Wayne C. Booth:** *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1961 (2nd ed. 1983).

Creative writing on style:

- **Ursula K. Le Guin:** *Steering the Craft: A Twenty-First-Century Guide to Sailing the Sea of Story*, Boston: Mariner Books 1998 (expanded ed. 2015). [Practical exercises on syntax, rhythm, sound]

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- **Constance Hale:** *Sin and Syntax: How to Craft Wicked Good Prose*, New York: Broadway Books 1999 (expanded ed. 2013).

On stream of consciousness and interior monologue:

- **Dorrit Cohn:** *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1978.
- **Robert Humphrey:** *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1954.

4. Dramaturgy

Classical dramaturgical theory:

- **Aristotle:** *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath, London: Penguin 1996. [Foundation: action, peripeteia, anagnorisis, catharsis]
- **Gustav Freytag:** *Technique of the Drama*, trans. Elias J. MacEwan, Chicago: Scott, Foresman 1895. [Freytag's pyramid, five-act structure]

Modern dramaturgical theory:

- **Lajos Egri:** *The Art of Dramatic Writing: Its Basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1946 (reissued 2004). [Premise, character orchestration, conflict]
- **Robert McKee:** *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*, New York: HarperCollins 1997.
- **David Mamet:** *Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama*, New York: Columbia University Press 1998.
- **John Yorke:** *Into the Woods: A Five-Act Journey Into Story*, London: Penguin 2013.

On building tension and pacing:

- **Linda Seger:** *Making a Good Script Great*, Hollywood: Samuel French 1987 (3rd ed. 2010).
- **Christopher Vogler:** *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions 1992 (3rd ed. 2007).

On planting and payoff:

- **Anton Chekhov:** *Letters*, various editions. [Famous dictum: "If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired"]

Literature

Theater theory (relevant to dramaturgy):

- **Peter Szondi:** *Theory of the Modern Drama*, trans. Michael Hays, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1987.
- **Bertolt Brecht:** *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett, New York: Hill and Wang 1964. [Epic theater, alienation effect, anti-Aristotelian dramaturgy]

On conflict and character arc:

- **Linda Seger:** *Creating Unforgettable Characters*, New York: Henry Holt 1990.
- **Michael Tierno:** *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters: Storytelling Secrets from the Greatest Mind in Western Civilization*, New York: Hyperion 2002.

On subtext and implicit dramaturgy:

- **David Ball:** *Backwards and Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 1983.

Creative writing on plot:

- **E.M. Forster:** *Aspects of the Novel*, London: Edward Arnold 1927 (reissued London: Penguin 2005). [Story vs. Plot: "The king died and then the queen died" vs. "The king died, and then the queen died of grief"]
- **Ronald B. Tobias:** *20 Master Plots and How to Build Them*, Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books 1993 (3rd ed. 2011).

On the hero's journey:

- **Joseph Campbell:** *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, New York: Pantheon Books 1949 (3rd ed. Novato: New World Library 2008).

5. Narratology

Classical and structuralist narratology:

- **Gérard Genette:** *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1980. [Foundational work: focalization, duration, frequency, order, mood]
- **Franz K. Stanzel:** *A Theory of Narrative*, trans. Charlotte Goedsche, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984.
- **Wayne C. Booth:** *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1961 (2nd ed. 1983). [Unreliable narrator, implied author, implied reader]

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Reception-aesthetic narratology:

- **Wolfgang Iser:** *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1974.
- **Wolfgang Iser:** *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1978.

Cognitive narratology:

- **David Herman:** *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 2002.
- **Monika Fludernik:** *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*, London: Routledge 1996.

On focalization:

- **Mieke Bal:** *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1985 (4th ed. 2017).

On unreliable narration:

- **Ansgar Nünning (ed.):** *Unreliable Narration: Studien zur Theorie und Praxis unglaubwürdigen Erzählens*, Trier: WVT 1998. [No English translation]

On time and temporal structure:

- **Paul Ricoeur:** *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin, David Pellauer, 3 vols., Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1984–1988.

On metafiction and self-reflexive narration:

- **Patricia Waugh:** *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, London: Methuen 1984 (reissued London: Routledge 2001).

Practical handbooks:

- **Ursula K. Le Guin:** *Steering the Craft: A Twenty-First-Century Guide to Sailing the Sea of Story*, Boston: Mariner Books 1998 (expanded ed. 2015). [Practical exercises on point of view, tense, person]
- **Percy Lubbock:** *The Craft of Fiction*, London: Jonathan Cape 1921 (reissued London: Penguin 2000).

On perspective and point of view:

- **Norman Friedman:** "Point of View in Fiction: The Development of a Critical Concept", in: *PMLA* 70:5 (1955), pp. 1160–1184.

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- **Dorrit Cohn:** *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1978. [Psychonarration, quoted monologue, narrated monologue]

6. Cultural References

Intertextuality theory (foundations):

- **Julia Kristeva:** "Word, Dialogue and Novel", in: *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press 1980, pp. 64–91. [Introduces the term "intertextuality"]
- **Gérard Genette:** *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman, Claude Doubinsky, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1997. [Systematics: hypotext/hypertext, transformation, imitation]
- **Roland Barthes:** "The Death of the Author", in: *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York: Hill and Wang 1977, pp. 142–148. [Text as tissue of quotations]
- **Roland Barthes:** *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang 1974. [Five codes, cultural code]
- **Mikhail Bakhtin:** *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1984. [Dialogism, polyphony, heteroglossia]

On influence and tradition:

- **T.S. Eliot:** "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), in: *The Sacred Wood*, London: Methuen 1920. [Tradition as living system]
- **Harold Bloom:** *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, New York: Oxford University Press 1973 (2nd ed. 1997). [Productive misreading, Oedipal conflict with precursors]
- **Harold Bloom:** *A Map of Misreading*, New York: Oxford University Press 1975.

On parody and pastiche:

- **Linda Hutcheon:** *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, New York: Methuen 1985 (reissued Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2000). [Parody as respectful critique]
- **Margaret A. Rose:** *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-modern*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993.

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- **Fredric Jameson:** *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press 1991. [Pastiche as "blank parody"]

On allusion:

- **Ziva Ben-Porat:** "The Poetics of Literary Allusion", in: *PTL: A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature* 1 (1976), pp. 105–128.

On metafiction:

- **Patricia Waugh:** *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, London: Methuen 1984 (reissued London: Routledge 2001).

Practical approaches:

- **Umberto Eco:** *Reflections on "The Name of the Rose"*, trans. William Weaver, London: Secker & Warburg 1985. [Authorial reflection on intertextuality]
- **Umberto Eco:** *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1989. [Openness, ambiguity, reader participation]

On canon and cultural memory:

- **Jan Assmann:** *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011. [Canon formation, cultural vs. communicative memory]
- **Harold Bloom:** *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, New York: Harcourt Brace 1994.

On postcolonial intertextuality:

- **Homi K. Bhabha:** *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge 1994. [Hybridity, "writing back"]

7. Poetics

Classical poetics:

- **Aristotle:** *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath, London: Penguin 1996. [Foundation: mimesis, genres, plot structure, catharsis]
- **Horace:** *Ars Poetica* (The Art of Poetry), trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1926 (Loeb Classical Library).
- **Nicolas Boileau:** *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Sir William Soames, John Dryden, London 1683 (various modern editions).

Literature

Russian Formalism:

- **Viktor Shklovsky:** "Art as Technique" (1917), in: Lee T. Lemon, Marion J. Reis (eds.): *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1965, pp. 3–24. [Defamiliarization, deautomatization]
- **Roman Jakobson:** "Linguistics and Poetics" (1960), in: *Language in Literature*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1987, pp. 62–94. [Poetic function of language]

Constraint-based poetics (Oulipo):

- **Raymond Queneau:** "Potential Literature", in: Warren F. Motte (ed.): *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1986 (expanded ed. Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press 1998), pp. 51–64.
- **Georges Perec:** "History of the Lipogram", in: Warren F. Motte (ed.): *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press 1998, pp. 97–108.
- **Warren F. Motte (ed.):** *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1986 (expanded ed. Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press 1998).

Nouveau Roman:

- **Alain Robbe-Grillet:** *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Grove Press 1965.
- **Nathalie Sarraute:** *The Age of Suspicion: Essays on the Novel*, trans. Maria Jolas, New York: George Braziller 1963.

Structuralist poetics:

- **Roland Barthes:** *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers, Colin Smith, New York: Hill and Wang 1968. [Écriture blanche, modes of writing]
- **Roland Barthes:** "The Death of the Author", in: *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York: Hill and Wang 1977, pp. 142–148.
- **Tzvetan Todorov:** *Introduction to Poetics*, trans. Richard Howard, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1981.

Reception aesthetics:

- **Wolfgang Iser:** *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1974.
- **Wolfgang Iser:** *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1978.

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Genre theory:

- **Emil Staiger:** *Grundbegriffe der Poetik*, Zürich: Atlantis 1946. [No English translation]
- **Gérard Genette:** *The Architext: An Introduction*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, Berkeley: University of California Press 1992.
- **Klaus W. Hempfer:** *Gattungstheorie*, Munich: Fink 1973. [No English translation]

Authorial poetics (self-reflection):

- **Umberto Eco:** *Reflections on "The Name of the Rose"*, trans. William Weaver, London: Secker & Warburg 1985.
- **Umberto Eco:** *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1989.
- **Ingeborg Bachmann:** Frankfurt Lectures (1959/60). [No English translation]

On aesthetic responsibility:

- **Jean-Paul Sartre:** *What Is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, New York: Philosophical Library 1949 (reissued London: Routledge 2001). [Engagement, responsibility of the writer]

Creative writing on poetics:

- **John Gardner:** *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*, New York: Knopf 1984. [Moral dimension of form]
- **Ursula K. Le Guin:** *Steering the Craft: A Twenty-First-Century Guide to Sailing the Sea of Story*, Boston: Mariner Books 1998 (expanded ed. 2015).

Modern poetics lectures:

- Various authors: Frankfurt Poetics Lectures, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp (since 1959). [Authorial self-reflection; no comprehensive English translation]

8. Revision and Textual Editing

Writing process research:

- **Donald M. Murray:** "Internal Revision: A Process of Discovery", in: Charles R. Cooper, Lee Odell (eds.): *Research on Composing: Points of Departure*, Urbana: NCTE 1978, pp. 85–103. [Revision as discovery, not correction]
- **Donald M. Murray:** *A Writer Teaches Writing*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1968 (2nd ed. 2004).
- **Linda S. Flower, John R. Hayes:** "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing", in: *College Composition and Communication* 32:4 (1981), pp. 365–387. [Foundational model: planning, translating, reviewing]

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- **Nancy Sommers:** "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers", in: *College Composition and Communication* 31:4 (1980), pp. 378–388. [Distinction between "revision" and "editing"]

On freewriting and generative methods:

- **Peter Elbow:** *Writing Without Teachers*, New York: Oxford University Press 1973 (2nd ed. 1998).
- **Peter Elbow:** *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*, New York: Oxford University Press 1981 (2nd ed. 1998).
- **Natalie Goldberg:** *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*, Boston: Shambhala 1986 (reissued 2005).

On revision and editing:

- **Nancy Welch:** *Getting Restless: Rethinking Revision in Writing Instruction*, Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook 1997.
- **Linda S. Flower et al.:** "Detection, Diagnosis, and the Strategies of Revision", in: *College Composition and Communication* 37:1 (1986), pp. 16–55.

On Writing Studies generally:

- **Charles Bazerman (ed.):** *Handbook of Research on Writing: History, Society, School, Individual, Text*, New York: Erlbaum 2008 (2nd ed. London: Routledge 2017).

Creative writing on process and revision:

- **Ursula K. Le Guin:** *Steering the Craft: A Twenty-First-Century Guide to Sailing the Sea of Story*, Boston: Mariner Books 1998 (expanded ed. 2015). [Practical exercises on revision, rhythm, sound]
- **Anne Lamott:** *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, New York: Pantheon 1994. ["Shitty first drafts", process approach]
- **Stephen King:** *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, New York: Scribner 2000. [On revision and "kill your darlings"]

On feedback and first readers:

- **Donald M. Murray:** *The Craft of Revision*, Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1991 (5th ed. 2012).

On empirical writing research:

- **Gert Rijlaarsdam, Huub van den Bergh (eds.):** *Effective Learning and Teaching of Writing*, Dordrecht: Kluwer 1996 (2nd ed. 2005).

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On keystroke logging and process observation:

- **Luuk Van Waes, Mariëlle Leijten, Christine M. Neuwirth (eds.):** *Writing and Digital Media*, Leiden: Brill 2006.
- **Mariëlle Leijten, Luuk Van Waes:** "Keystroke Logging in Writing Research: Using Inputlog to Analyze and Visualize Writing Processes", in: *Written Communication* 30:3 (2013), pp. 358–392.

Digital humanities and writing research:

- **Matthew K. Gold, Lauren F. Klein (eds.):** *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2012 (expanded eds. 2016, 2019).

On editorial processes:

- **Jack Hart:** *A Writer's Coach: The Complete Guide to Writing Strategies That Work*, New York: Anchor 2006.

On reading aloud and sound:

- **Virginia Tufte:** *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*, Cheshire: Graphics Press 2006.

On over-revision:

- **Donald M. Murray:** "The Maker's Eye: Revising Your Own Manuscripts", in: *The Writer* (1973), reprinted in numerous anthologies.

9. Ethics

On the ethical responsibility of the writer:

- **Jean-Paul Sartre:** *What Is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, New York: Philosophical Library 1949 (reissued London: Routledge 2001). [Engagement, concrete responsibility, contra Adorno]
- **Wayne C. Booth:** *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1988.
- **Martha C. Nussbaum:** *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, Boston: Beacon Press 1995.

On representation and responsibility:

- **Susan Sontag:** *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2003.
- **Susan Sontag:** *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1978/1989 (combined ed. New York: Picador 2001).

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- **Edward W. Said:** *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon 1978 (25th anniversary ed. New York: Vintage 2003).

On kitsch and aesthetic ethics:

- **Clement Greenberg:** "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), in: *Art and Culture*, Boston: Beacon Press 1961, pp. 3–21.
- **Milan Kundera:** *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim, New York: Harper & Row 1984. [Kitsch as "denial of shit", chapter on total kitsch]
- **Hermann Broch:** "Das Böse im Wertsystem der Kunst" (1933), in: *Schriften zur Literatur 1*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1975. [No English translation; kitsch as "evil in the value system of art"]

Anti-hermeneutics and aesthetic ethics:

- **Susan Sontag:** "Against Interpretation" (1964), in: *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1966. ["An erotics of art" instead of hermeneutics]

Empirical literary studies and constructivism:

- **Siegfried J. Schmidt:** *Grundriß der Empirischen Literaturwissenschaft*, Braunschweig: Vieweg 1980. [No English translation; meaning as construction, not as textual property]
- **Siegfried J. Schmidt (ed.):** *Literaturwissenschaft und Systemtheorie*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag 1993. [No English translation]

On "right life in the wrong" (Adorno vs. engagement):

- **Theodor W. Adorno:** *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, London: New Left Books 1974 (reissued London: Verso 2005). [Aphorism 18: "There is no right life in the wrong"]
- **Jean-Paul Sartre:** *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber, New Haven: Yale University Press 2007. [Concrete responsibility despite system]

On stereotypes and bias in literature:

- **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie:** "The Danger of a Single Story", TED Talk 2009 (transcript available). [On the ethics of one-sided narratives]

Part Two: Curatorial Competencies

The research landscape on AI-assisted creative writing is characterized by a remarkable paradox: While millions of users work daily with Large Language Models, the scholarly exploration of aesthetically ambitious practice remains rudimentary. There is no shortage of literature—but the question of AI-assisted writing that meets the highest literary standards is being overlooked.

Four structural gaps characterize this situation. First, technical literature ignores aesthetics: Computational Creativity operates with a reductionist concept of creativity and metrics such as coherence, diversity, and plausibility, without addressing the question of literary substance. Second, literary studies ignore AI practice: AI is treated as a theoretical object or threat, rarely as a tool; empirical engagement with curatorial work is absent. Third, writing pedagogy remains pre-theoretical: guides treat AI as an efficiency tool without conceptual reflection on changed authorship. Fourth, process research is missing: Established Writing Studies methods such as keystroke logging or think-aloud protocols are not applied to AI-assisted writing. The practice of curatorial writing remains scholarly unexplored.

The publications listed below are divided into two areas: Part A assembles foundational literature on curation, AI technology, algorithmic literature, writing process research, and AI ethics that is relevant to all competencies and is therefore listed only once. Part B lists competency-specific literature where it exists—mostly technical papers on partial aspects such as style transfer or automated plot generation.

A: FOUNDATIONAL LITERATURE

On curation and curatorial practice

- **Nicolas Bourriaud:** *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, New York: Lukas & Sternberg 2004.
- **Luciano Floridi:** "Distant Writing: Literary Production in the Age of Artificial Intelligence", in: *Minds and Machines* 35:3 (2025).

AI and Computational Creativity (general)

- **Margaret A. Boden:** *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1990 (expanded ed. London: Routledge 2004).
- **Stuart Russell, Peter Norvig:** *Artificial Intelligence: A Modern Approach*, Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall 1995 (4th ed. Hoboken: Pearson 2020).

Literature

- **Tony Veale, Hannu Toivonen, Pablo Gervás (eds.):** "Computational Creativity: Theory and Practice", Special Issue of *Minds and Machines* 26:1-2 (2016).

Technical foundations on LLMs

Popular science introductions:

- **Stephen Wolfram:** "What Is ChatGPT Doing... and Why Does It Work?", online essay 2023. Expanded book version: Champaign: Wolfram Media 2023.
- **Melanie Mitchell:** *Artificial Intelligence: A Guide for Thinking Humans*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2019.
- **Stuart Russell:** *Human Compatible: Artificial Intelligence and the Problem of Control*, New York: Viking 2019.

Technical introductions:

- **Dan Jurafsky, James H. Martin:** *Speech and Language Processing: An Introduction to Natural Language Processing, Computational Linguistics, and Speech Recognition*, Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall 2000 (3rd ed. draft: Stanford 2023, freely available online).
- **Ian Goodfellow, Yoshua Bengio, Aaron Courville:** *Deep Learning*, Cambridge: MIT Press 2016.

Foundational papers:

- **Tomas Mikolov, Kai Chen, Greg Corrado, Jeffrey Dean:** "Efficient Estimation of Word Representations in Vector Space", arXiv preprint arXiv:1301.3781 (2013).
- **Ashish Vaswani, Noam Shazeer, Niki Parmar, Jakob Uszkoreit, Llion Jones, Aidan N. Gomez, Łukasz Kaiser, Illia Polosukhin:** "Attention Is All You Need", arXiv preprint arXiv:1706.03762 (2017).
- **Alec Radford, Karthik Narasimhan, Tim Salimans, Ilya Sutskever:** "Improving Language Understanding by Generative Pre-Training", OpenAI 2018.
- **Alec Radford, Jeffrey Wu, Rewon Child, David Luan, Dario Amodei, Ilya Sutskever:** "Language Models are Unsupervised Multitask Learners", OpenAI 2019.
- **Tom B. Brown et al.:** "Language Models are Few-Shot Learners", arXiv preprint arXiv:2005.14165 (2020).
- **Long Ouyang et al.:** "Training Language Models to Follow Instructions with Human Feedback", arXiv preprint arXiv:2203.02155 (2022).
- **Jason Wei, Xuezhi Wang, Dale Schuurmans et al.:** "Chain-of-Thought Prompting Elicits Reasoning in Large Language Models", arXiv preprint arXiv:2201.11903 (2022).

Literature

- **Ziwei Ji, Nayeon Lee, Rita Frieske, Tiezheng Yu, Dan Su, Yan Xu, Etsuko Ishii, Ye Jin Bang, Andrea Madotto, Pascale Fung:** "Survey of Hallucination in Natural Language Generation", in: *ACM Computing Surveys* 55:12 (2023), Article 248.

Corporate documentation (freely available online):

- **OpenAI:** "GPT Best Practices", OpenAI Documentation, openai.com/docs
- **Anthropic:** "Claude Documentation", docs.anthropic.com
- **Google:** "Gemini API Documentation" and "Responsible AI Practices"

Algorithmic literature (pre-LLM era)

- **Hannes Bajohr (ed.):** *Schreibenlassen. Texte zur Literatur im Digitalen*, Berlin: Matthes & Seitz 2022. [No English translation]
- **N. Katherine Hayles:** *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2017.
- **Annette Gilbert (ed.):** *Wiederaufgelegt. Zur Appropriation von Texten und Büchern in Büchern*, Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos 2012. [No English translation]

Writing process research (conventional)

- **Linda S. Flower, John R. Hayes:** "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing", in: *College Composition and Communication* 32:4 (1981), pp. 365–387.
- **Nancy Sommers:** "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers", in: *College Composition and Communication* 31:4 (1980), pp. 378–388.

AI ethics and governance

- **Joy Buolamwini, Timnit Gebru:** "Gender Shades: Intersectional Accuracy Disparities in Commercial Gender Classification", in: *Proceedings of Machine Learning Research* 81 (2018), pp. 1–15.
- **Safiya Umoja Noble:** *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, New York: NYU Press 2018.
- **Cathy O'Neil:** *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*, New York: Crown 2016.
- **Matthew Sag:** "Copyright and Copy-Reliant Technology", in: *Northwestern University Law Review* 103:4 (2009), pp. 1607–1682.
- **Pamela Samuelson:** "Generative AI Meets Copyright", in: *Science* 381:6654 (2023), pp. 158–161.

Literature

- **European Union:** *Regulation on Artificial Intelligence (AI Act)*, adopted 2024, entering into force 2026. Official text available via EUR-Lex.

B: COMPETENCY-SPECIFIC LITERATURE

World Knowledge

No competency-specific literature available.

Psychological Logic

- **Rosalind W. Picard:** *Affective Computing*, Cambridge: MIT Press 1997.
- **Mark O. Riedl, R. Michael Young:** "Narrative Planning: Balancing Plot and Character", in: *Journal of Artificial Intelligence Research* 39 (2010), pp. 217–268.
- **Abeba Birhane, Vinay Uday Prabhu, Emmanuel Kahembwe:** "Multimodal Datasets: Misogyny, Pornography, and Malignant Stereotypes", arXiv preprint arXiv:2110.01963 (2021).

Stylistics

- **Tianxiao Shen, Tao Lei, Regina Barzilay, Tommi Jaakkola:** "Style Transfer from Non-Parallel Text by Cross-Alignment", in: *Proceedings of NIPS 2017*.
- **John Burrows:** *Computation into Criticism: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels and an Experiment in Method*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1987.

Dramaturgy

- **Mark O. Riedl, Vadim Bulitko:** "Interactive Narrative: An Intelligent Systems Approach", in: *AI Magazine* 34:1 (2013), pp. 67–77.
- **Rafael Pérez y Pérez, Mike Sharples:** "Three Computer-Based Models of Storytelling: BRUTUS, MINSTREL and MEXICA", in: *Knowledge-Based Systems* 17:1 (2004), pp. 15–29.

Narratology

- **Mark A. Finlayson:** "Inferring Propp's Functions from Semantically Annotated Text", in: *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 63:11 (2012), pp. 2154–2169.

Cultural References

No competency-specific literature available.

Poetics

No competency-specific literature available.

Literature

Iterative Control

No competency-specific literature available.

Ethics (aesthetically ambitious AI writing)

- **Hannes Bajohr:** "Algorithmic Empathy: Toward a Critique of Aesthetic AI", in: *ELH* 89:3 (2022), pp. 633–658.
- **Joanna J. Bryson, Mihailis E. Diamantis, Thomas D. Grant:** *Human Rights and 21st Century Challenges: Poverty, Conflict, and the Environment*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2023.

System Diagnosis (technical knowledge for curators)

No literature available.

Exemplary Literary Works

The following literature list is divided into three parts: Part A lists literary works created using Large Language Models (as of January 2025 practically empty, since aesthetically ambitious AI-assisted literature either does not exist or is not declared as such). Part B presents works for the exemplary demonstration of the seven authorial competencies, Part C identifies commercially successful works with grave competency deficits.

Part A: Literary Works Written with AI Assistance

To date, there exists no literature recognized by literary criticism as aesthetically sophisticated that was demonstrably created with AI assistance. The reasons are structural: Large Language Models are too new (GPT-3 from 2020, ChatGPT from late 2022)—the time between availability, production, publication, and critical reception is too short. Moreover, massive stigmatization prevails: AI use in the literary field is seen as delegitimizing, which is why many authors who experiment conceal it. What exists is received in niches, not in the feuilleton.

Some authors nevertheless work openly with AI: K Allado-McDowell published the philosophical text *Pharmako-AI* (2020) in co-authorship with GPT-3. The poet Sasha Stiles develops poems with AI assistance. Vauhini Vara wrote the highly praised essay "Ghosts" (2021) with GPT-3 about her sister's death. The science fiction author Robin Sloan experiments publicly with LLMs but has not yet published a book explicitly designated as AI-assisted. The practice remains marginal.

Part B: Literary Works for Exemplary Demonstration of the Seven Authorial Competencies

The following selection of literary works makes no canonical claim. It is neither systematic nor comprehensive. Rather, these are reading suggestions that enable one to become familiar with the practical sphere of influence of individual authorial competencies through direct reading experience. Those who wish to understand what "excellent stylistics," "masterful dramaturgy," or "sophisticated narratology" concretely mean will find here texts on which these qualities can be studied exemplarily.

1. WORLD KNOWLEDGE

Historical world knowledge (meticulous period research):

- **Umberto Eco:** *Il nome della rosa / The Name of the Rose* (1980) [Medieval theology, monastic architecture, paleography]
- **Hilary Mantel:** *Wolf Hall* (2009) [Tudor England, political mechanisms, daily life at Henry VIII's court]
- **Robert Graves:** *I, Claudius* (1934) [Roman Empire, political intrigues]
- **Gore Vidal:** *Lincoln* (1984) [American Civil War, political strategies]
- **Naguib Mahfouz:** *Al-Thulāthiyya / The Cairo Trilogy* (1956–1957) [Cairo from the late 19th century to the 1940s, social transformations]

Social world knowledge (milieu, class, economic structures):

- **Émile Zola:** *Germinal* (1885) [Coal miners' milieu, strike logic—after field research]
- **John Steinbeck:** *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) [Migrant workers, Great Depression]
- **Upton Sinclair:** *The Jungle* (1906) [Chicago stockyards after investigative research]
- **Theodore Dreiser:** *Sister Carrie* (1900) [Urbanization, social mobility]
- **Mo Yan:** *Shēngsǐ píláo / Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* (2006) [Rural China, 20th century, social upheavals]

Craft/technical world knowledge:

- **Herman Melville:** *Moby-Dick* (1851) [Whaling, maritime technology]
- **Patrick O'Brian:** *Master and Commander* (1969) [Napoleonic naval warfare, navigation]
- **Dorothy L. Sayers:** *The Nine Tailors* (1934) [Bell-founding, change ringing]
- **Arthur Hailey:** *Airport* (1968) [Airport operations, aviation technology]

Exemplary Literary Works

Medical/scientific world knowledge:

- **Sinclair Lewis:** *Arrowsmith* (1925) [Medical research, bacteriology]
- **Richard Powers:** *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991) [Molecular biology, DNA research]
- **Michael Crichton:** *The Andromeda Strain* (1969) [Microbiology, quarantine protocols]

Geographic/cultural world knowledge:

- **Chinua Achebe:** *Things Fall Apart* (1958) [Igbo culture, precolonial Nigeria]
- **Amitav Ghosh:** *The Glass Palace* (2000) [Burma/Myanmar, colonial history]
- **James A. Michener:** *Hawaii* (1959) [Pacific island history, cultural overlays]

World knowledge through reportage method:

- **Truman Capote:** *In Cold Blood* (1966) [Journalistic research, Kansas milieu]
- **Norman Mailer:** *The Executioner's Song* (1979) [Gary Gilmore case, Utah milieu]

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL LOGIC

Opaque psychology (Dostoevsky line: contradictory, torn):

- **Fyodor M. Dostoevsky:** *Zapiski iz podpol'ja / Notes from Underground* (1864) [Self-destructive irrationality, resentment]
- **Fyodor M. Dostoevsky:** *Bésy / Demons* (1872) [Stavrogin: impenetrable, psychologically opaque]
- **Fyodor M. Dostoevsky:** *Prestuplenie i nakazanie / Crime and Punishment* (1866) [Raskolnikov: irrational motives]
- **Fyodor M. Dostoevsky:** *Idiot / The Idiot* (1869) [Myshkin: "impossibility of goodness"]
- **Kenzaburō Ōe:** *Kojinteki na taiken / A Personal Matter* (1964) [Psychological dividedness, moral opacity]

Obliteration of the self (Kafka line: false self without true):

- **Franz Kafka:** *Die Verwandlung / The Metamorphosis* (1915) [Gregor Samsa: complete adaptation to self-obliteration]
- **Franz Kafka:** *Der Prozess / The Trial* (1925) [Josef K.: system devours subjectivity]
- **Albert Camus:** *L'Étranger / The Stranger* (1942) [Meursault: emotional flatness]

Exemplary Literary Works

Fragmented consciousness (modernist interiority):

- **Virginia Woolf:** *To the Lighthouse* (1927) [Mrs. Ramsay: stream of consciousness]
- **William Faulkner:** *As I Lay Dying* (1930) [15 perspectives, different degrees of consciousness]
- **Clarice Lispector:** *A hora da estrela / The Hour of the Star* (1977) [Fragmented consciousness, inner voices]

Unreliable psychology (self-deception, repression):

- **Ford Madox Ford:** *The Good Soldier* (1915) [Unreliable narrator, self-blindness]
- **Kazuo Ishiguro:** *The Remains of the Day* (1989) [Stevens: lifelong self-deception]

Psychology without psychologizing (show, don't tell):

- **Ernest Hemingway:** *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) [Jake Barnes: trauma shown only through behavior]
- **Raymond Carver:** *Cathedral* (1983) [Minimalist psychology]

Hardening and isolation:

- **J.M. Coetzee:** *Disgrace* (1999) [David Lurie: moral hardening]
- **Knut Hamsun:** *Sult / Hunger* (1890) [Psychological decay without explanation]

Trauma and memory:

- **Toni Morrison:** *Beloved* (1987) [Sethe: trauma logic, fragmented remembering]
- **Pat Barker:** *Regeneration* (1991) [Shellshock, WWI trauma]

Child psychology:

- **Henry James:** *What Maisie Knew* (1897) [Child perception]
- **William Golding:** *Lord of the Flies* (1954) [Regression psychology]

Pathological psychology:

- **Patricia Highsmith:** *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) [Psychopathy without moralizing]
- **Jean Rhys:** *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) [Psychological breakdown]
- **Yukio Mishima:** *Kamen no kokuhaku / Confessions of a Mask* (1949) [Pathological identity, self-alienation]

Subtle everyday psychology:

- **Jane Austen:** *Emma* (1815) [Self-deception, social blindness]
- **Alice Munro:** *Dear Life* (2012) [Everyday self-deceptions]

Exemplary Literary Works

Psychoanalysis as structure:

- **Thomas Mann:** *Der Tod in Venedig / Death in Venice* (1912) [Aschenbach's repression, regression]
- **Philip Roth:** *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) [Psychoanalytic monologue]

3. STYLISTICS

Foreground style (Homeric clarity):

- **Homer:** *Iliad / Odyssey* (ca. 8th c. BCE) [Paradigm of illuminating style]

Background style (suggestion, gaps):

- **The Old Testament:** Genesis 22 (Binding of Isaac) [Paradigm of suggestive style]
- **Franz Kafka:** *Die Verwandlung / The Metamorphosis* (1915) [Modern variant: sparse, enigmatic prose]

Classical period and symmetry:

- **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe:** *Die Wahlverwandtschaften / Elective Affinities* (1809) [Symmetrical sentence architecture]

Realist style (detail as social index):

- **Gustave Flaubert:** *Madame Bovary* (1857) [Paradigm of effet de réel]
- **Honoré de Balzac:** *Le Père Goriot / Old Goriot* (1835) [Detail as social anchor]
- **Émile Zola:** *Germinal* (1885) [Naturalistic precision]
- **Machado de Assis:** *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas / The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1881) [Brazilian realism with ironic distance]

Stream of consciousness (syntactic fragmentation):

- **Virginia Woolf:** *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) [Measured syntax breaks]
- **James Joyce:** *Ulysses* (1922) [18 different styles]
- **William Faulkner:** *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) [Interior monologue of different degrees of consciousness]

Terse hardness (reduction, omission):

- **Ernest Hemingway:** *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) [Iceberg theory]
- **Samuel Beckett:** *Molloy* (1951) [Reduction as aesthetic principle]

Exemplary Literary Works

- **Juan Rulfo:** *Pedro Páramo* (1955) [Sparse, fragmented prose, lyrical reduction]

Complex period (hypotaxis, embedded sentences):

- **Marcel Proust:** *À la recherche du temps perdu / In Search of Lost Time* (1913–1927) [Monumental periods]
- **Thomas Mann:** *Der Zauberberg / The Magic Mountain* (1924) [Ironic distance through syntactic complexity]

Style breaks and montage:

- **Alfred Döblin:** *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) [Montage of different style levels]
- **John Dos Passos:** *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) [Camera-eye technique]

Rhythm and sound:

- **Gertrude Stein:** *Three Lives* (1909) [Repetition as stylistic principle]
- **Toni Morrison:** *Beloved* (1987) [Oral tradition, rhythmic prose]

Syntactic idiosyncrasy (écart as system):

- **Michel de Montaigne:** *Essais / Essays* (1580–1588) [Thought process as form]
- **Christa Wolf:** *Nachdenken über Christa T. / The Quest for Christa T.* (1968) [Searching syntax, subjunctive of possibility]

Lyrical prose (image, metaphor, compression):

- **Djuna Barnes:** *Nightwood* (1936) [Metaphorical density]
- **Cormac McCarthy:** *Blood Meridian* (1985) [Biblical cadence, apocalyptic tone]

4. DRAMATURGY

Classical Aristotelian dramaturgy (peripeteia, anagnorisis, catharsis):

- **Sophocles:** *Oedipus Rex* (ca. 429 BCE) [Paradigm of classical dramaturgy]
- **William Shakespeare:** *Hamlet* (ca. 1600) [Complex plot development, delayed revenge]
- **William Shakespeare:** *King Lear* (ca. 1605) [Double plot, fall and catharsis]

Psychological dramaturgy (inner conflict dominates):

- **Henrik Ibsen:** *Gengangere / Ghosts* (1881) [Analytical drama]
- **Henrik Ibsen:** *Hedda Gabler* (1890) [Psychological escalation without external action]
- **Anton Chekhov:** *Tschajka / The Seagull* (1896) [Anti-spectacular dramaturgy]

Exemplary Literary Works

- **Anton Chekhov:** *Tri sestry / Three Sisters* (1901) [Longing as motor]
- **August Strindberg:** *Fröken Julie / Miss Julie* (1888) [Social and sexual power]

Chamber play (intensive concentration, few characters):

- **Ingmar Bergman:** *Scener ur ett äktenskap / Scenes from a Marriage* (1973) [Six scenes, minimalist]
- **Edward Albee:** *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) [Four people, one night]
- **Harold Pinter:** *Betrayal* (1978) [Told backwards]

Refusal of catharsis (anti-Aristotelian):

- **Samuel Beckett:** *En attendant Godot / Waiting for Godot* (1953) [Nothing happens twice]
- **Samuel Beckett:** *Fin de partie / Endgame* (1957) [Static dramaturgy]
- **Ingmar Bergman:** *Persona* (1966) [No resolution, identity fusion]

Epic dramaturgy (alienation, interruption):

- **Bertolt Brecht:** *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder / Mother Courage and Her Children* (1941) [Episodic structure]
- **Bertolt Brecht:** *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan / The Good Person of Szechwan* (1943) [Parable structure, songs]

Complex plot structures (multiple storylines):

- **Charles Dickens:** *Bleak House* (1853) [Parallel strands, two narrators]
- **George Eliot:** *Middlemarch* (1871–72) [Four parallel love stories]
- **Leo Tolstoy:** *Anna Karenina* (1878) [Double plot Anna/Levin]

Minimalist dramaturgy (reduction to essence):

- **Ernest Hemingway:** *Hills Like White Elephants* (1927) [Conflict in subtext]
- **Raymond Carver:** *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) [Minimal action]

Temporal inversion/non-linear:

- **Martin Amis:** *Time's Arrow* (1991) [Told backwards]
- **Harold Pinter:** *Betrayal* (1978) [Chronologically reversed]
- **Juan Rulfo:** *Pedro Páramo* (1955) [Non-linear time, dead and living simultaneously]

Suspense vs. surprise:

- **Daphne du Maurier:** *Rebecca* (1938) [Psychological suspense]

Exemplary Literary Works

- **Patricia Highsmith:** *Strangers on a Train* (1950) [Exchange-murder plot]

Tragedy of necessity (no choice):

- **Fyodor M. Dostoevsky:** *Prestuplenie i nakazanie / Crime and Punishment* (1866) [Psychological inevitability]
- **Theodore Dreiser:** *An American Tragedy* (1925) [Social determination]

Fall height and reversal:

- **Edith Wharton:** *The House of Mirth* (1905) [Social descent]
- **F. Scott Fitzgerald:** *The Great Gatsby* (1925) [Rise and fall]

Ritualized dramaturgy:

- **Ingmar Bergman:** *Fanny och Alexander / Fanny and Alexander* (1982) [Family celebrations as anchor points]
- **Gabriel García Márquez:** *Crónica de una muerte anunciada / Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981) [Ending known, tension through "how?"]

Silence as dramaturgical means:

- **Ingmar Bergman:** *Tystnaden / The Silence* (1963) [Long wordless sequences]
- **Cormac McCarthy:** *The Road* (2006) [Minimal dialogue, apocalyptic reduction]

Ensemble dramaturgy (no clear protagonist):

- **Robert Altman:** *Short Cuts* (1993, after Carver) [Nine parallel plots]
- **Michael Cunningham:** *The Hours* (1998) [Three time levels, three women]

5. NARRATOLOGY

Internal focalization (strictly limited perspective):

- **Henry James:** *The Ambassadors* (1903) [Strictly limited to Strether's perception]
- **Virginia Woolf:** *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) [Shifting internal focalization]

External focalization (behaviorist, no inner view):

- **Ernest Hemingway:** *Hills Like White Elephants* (1927) [Purely dialogic]
- **Dashiell Hammett:** *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) [Strictly external]

Authorial narration (with commentary):

- **Gustave Flaubert:** *Madame Bovary* (1857) [Style indirect libre]

Exemplary Literary Works

- **George Eliot:** *Middlemarch* (1871–72) [Authorial commentary with moral reflection]
- **Thomas Mann:** *Buddenbrooks* (1901) [Ironic distance]

Unreliable narration:

- **Ford Madox Ford:** *The Good Soldier* (1915) [Paradigm: Dowell understands nothing]
- **Kazuo Ishiguro:** *The Remains of the Day* (1989) [Stevens' self-deception]
- **Vladimir Nabokov:** *Pale Fire* (1962) [Mad commentator]
- **Vladimir Nabokov:** *Lolita* (1955) [Humbert Humbert: charmingly unreliable, morally blind]
- **Gillian Flynn:** *Gone Girl* (2012) [Doubly unreliable]
- **Machado de Assis:** *Dom Casmurro* (1899) [Classic of unreliable narration, jealousy]

Multiperspectivity (different narrators):

- **William Faulkner:** *As I Lay Dying* (1930) [15 narrators]
- **William Faulkner:** *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) [Four perspectives]
- **Lawrence Durrell:** *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957–1960) [Same events, four perspectives]
- **Orhan Pamuk:** *Benim Adım Kırmızı / My Name Is Red* (1998) [Multiperspectivity incl. objects as narrators]

Second-person narration:

- **Italo Calvino:** *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore / If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979) [Metafictional you-address]
- **Jay McInerney:** *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984) [You in present tense]

First-person narration (homodiegetic):

- **Charlotte Brontë:** *Jane Eyre* (1847) [Retrospective first-person narration]
- **J.D. Salinger:** *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) [Adolescent voice]

Framing (frame narrative):

- **Joseph Conrad:** *Heart of Darkness* (1899) [Marlow through another narrator]
- **Emily Brontë:** *Wuthering Heights* (1847) [Multiply framed]

Metafiction (self-reflexive):

- **Italo Calvino:** *Le città invisibili / Invisible Cities* (1972) [Marco Polo tells the Khan]
- **John Barth:** *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) [Self-reflexive short stories]

Exemplary Literary Works

- **Italo Calvino:** *Il castello dei destini incrociati* / *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1973) [Tarot as narrative system]

Stream of consciousness (interior monologue):

- **James Joyce:** *Ulysses* (1922) [Molly Bloom's monologue without punctuation]
- **Virginia Woolf:** *The Waves* (1931) [Six streams of consciousness]

Temporal complexity (analepsis/prolepsis, time jumps):

- **Marcel Proust:** *À la recherche du temps perdu* / *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–1927) [Memory as temporal structure]
- **Gabriel García Márquez:** *Cien años de soledad* / *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) [Circular time]
- **Martin Amis:** *Time's Arrow* (1991) [Told backwards]

Experimental narrative forms:

- **Julio Cortázar:** *Rayuela* / *Hopscotch* (1963) [Alternative reading path]
- **B.S. Johnson:** *The Unfortunates* (1969) [Loose-leaf collection]

Collective narrative perspective (we-narrator):

- **Jeffrey Eugenides:** *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) [Collective "we"]
- **Joshua Ferris:** *Then We Came to the End* (2007) [Office-we]

Episodic structure:

- **Jennifer Egan:** *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) [13 linked stories]

Present vs. past tense (tense choice):

- **Hilary Mantel:** *Wolf Hall* (2009) [Historical novel in present tense]

Minimal narration (radical reduction):

- **Samuel Beckett:** *Company* (1980) [Voice in darkness]

6. CULTURAL REFERENCES

Explicit quotation montage:

- **T.S. Eliot:** *The Waste Land* (1922) [Montage from Dante, Shakespeare, Ovid, Wagner]
- **Ezra Pound:** *The Cantos* (1925–1969) [Multilingual quotation collage]

Exemplary Literary Works

Structural transformation (hypotext/hypertext):

- **James Joyce:** *Ulysses* (1922) [Odyssey structure transposed to Dublin 1904]
- **John Gardner:** *Grendel* (1971) [Beowulf from the monster's perspective]
- **Jean Rhys:** *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) [Prequel to Jane Eyre]
- **J.M. Coetzee:** *Foe* (1986) [Rewriting of Defoe's Robinson Crusoe]

Parody (critically respectful):

- **Miguel de Cervantes:** *Don Quijote / Don Quixote* (1605/1615) [Parody of chivalric romances]
- **Laurence Sterne:** *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767) [Parody of novel conventions]
- **Tom Stoppard:** *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) [Hamlet parody]

Pastiche (style imitation without critique):

- **Umberto Eco:** *Il nome della rosa / The Name of the Rose* (1980) [Medieval chronicle imitation]

Palimpsest (visible layers):

- **Christa Wolf:** *Kassandra / Cassandra* (1983) [Trojan War, feminist rereading]
- **Margaret Atwood:** *The Penelopiad* (2005) [Odyssey from Penelope's view]

Metafiction (self-reflexive intertextuality):

- **Italo Calvino:** *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore / If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979) [10 novel fragments]
- **Italo Calvino:** *Il castello dei destini incrociati / The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1973) [Tarot as narrative system]
- **Jorge Luis Borges:** *Ficciones / Fictions* (1944) [Invented books, imaginary libraries]
- **Vladimir Nabokov:** *Pale Fire* (1962) [Poem with mad commentary]

Mythological references:

- **Thomas Mann:** *Joseph und seine Brüder / Joseph and His Brothers* (1933–1943) [Genesis myth psychologically penetrated]
- **Christa Wolf:** *Medea. Stimmen / Medea: A Modern Retelling* (1996) [Medea myth reread]
- **Ben Okri:** *The Famished Road* (1991) [Yoruba mythology, magical realism]

Intertextual dialogues (explicitly named tradition):

- **Dante Alighieri:** *Divina Commedia / Divine Comedy* (ca. 1307–1321) [Virgil as guide]

Exemplary Literary Works

Quotation as structural principle:

- **Walter Benjamin:** *Passagen-Werk / The Arcades Project* (posthumous 1982) [Montage of quotations]

Postcolonial "writing back":

- **Salman Rushdie:** *Midnight's Children* (1981) [Indian history against British historiography]
- **Chinua Achebe:** *Things Fall Apart* (1958) [Response to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*]

Literary archaeology:

- **Marguerite Yourcenar:** *Mémoires d'Hadrien / Memoirs of Hadrian* (1951) [Reconstruction of ancient thought]

Multiple reference levels:

- **James Joyce:** *Finnegans Wake* (1939) [Multilingual reference compression]

Genre intertextuality:

- **Michael Chabon:** *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000) [Comic history as cultural archive]

Bibliophile metafiction:

- **Arturo Pérez-Reverte:** *El club Dumas / The Club Dumas* (1993) [Book detective, Dumas references]

Postmodern intertextuality:

- **John Barth:** *Chimera* (1972) [1001 Nights, Perseus/Bellerophon myths]
- **A.S. Byatt:** *Possession* (1990) [Victorian poetry, literary scholarship detective work]

Cultural-critical references:

- **Thomas Pynchon:** *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) [Encyclopedic reference density]

Fairy tale rereading:

- **Angela Carter:** *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) [Feminist fairy tale rewritings]

Intertextuality as detective structure:

- **Umberto Eco:** *Il pendolo di Foucault / Foucault's Pendulum* (1988) [Conspiracy theories, esoteric archive]

Literature about literature:

- **David Lodge:** *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (1965) [Parodies literary styles]

Exemplary Literary Works

Circular references:

- **Jorge Luis Borges:** "Pierre Menard, Autor des Quijote" / "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" (1939) [Identical rewriting as new work]

Polyphonic library:

- **Roberto Bolaño:** 2666 (2004) [Literary history, violence, global references]

7. POETICS

Self-reflexive poetics (metafiction):

- **Italo Calvino:** *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* / *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979) [Novel about reading and writing]
- **Vladimir Nabokov:** *Pale Fire* (1962) [Poetic experiment]
- **John Barth:** *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) [Metafictional short stories]

Constraint-based literature (Oulipo):

- **Georges Perec:** *La Disparition* / *A Void* (1969) [Novel without "e"]
- **Raymond Queneau:** *Exercices de style* / *Exercises in Style* (1947) [Same anecdote in 99 styles]
- **Georges Perec:** *La Vie mode d'emploi* / *Life: A User's Manual* (1978) [Complex constraint structure]
- **Italo Calvino:** *Le città invisibili* / *Invisible Cities* (1972) [Combinatorial structure]

Nouveau Roman (anti-psychological, objective):

- **Alain Robbe-Grillet:** *La Jalousie* / *Jealousy* (1957) [Purely objective description]
- **Nathalie Sarraute:** *Tropismes* / *Tropisms* (1939) [Minimal movements instead of action]
- **Claude Simon:** *La Route des Flandres* / *The Flanders Road* (1960) [Dissolution of chronological order]

Anti-Aristotelian poetics (refusal of catharsis):

- **Samuel Beckett:** *En attendant Godot* / *Waiting for Godot* (1953) [Anti-drama]
- **Samuel Beckett:** *Molloy* (1951) [Circularity instead of progression]
- **Thomas Bernhard:** *Auslöschung. Ein Zerfall* / *Extinction* (1986) [Endless periods, no redemption]

Exemplary Literary Works

Genre experiments:

- **W.G. Sebald:** *Die Ringe des Saturn / The Rings of Saturn* (1995) [Hybrid text: essay, travelogue, novel]
- **David Markson:** *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988) [Fragmented interior monologue]

Explicit procedural poetics:

- **James Joyce:** *Ulysses* (1922) [18 different styles and procedures]
- **Virginia Woolf:** *The Waves* (1931) [Six streams of consciousness, lyrical prose]

Combinatorial poetics:

- **Julio Cortázar:** *Rayuela / Hopscotch* (1963) [Alternative reading path]
- **Italo Calvino:** *Il castello dei destini incrociati / The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1973) [Tarot as combinatorial system]

Poetics of genre mixing:

- **Hans Magnus Enzensberger:** *Der kurze Sommer der Anarchie / The Short Summer of Anarchy* (1972) [Documentary literature, montage]
- **Christa Wolf:** *Nachdenken über Christa T. / The Quest for Christa T.* (1968) [Essay-novel, searching form]

Minimalist poetics:

- **Raymond Carver:** *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) [Extreme reduction, "dirty realism"]
- **Ernest Hemingway:** *In Our Time* (1925) [Iceberg theory practiced]

Maximalist poetics:

- **Thomas Pynchon:** *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) [Encyclopedic abundance]
- **David Foster Wallace:** *Infinite Jest* (1996) [1000+ pages, 388 footnotes]

Poetics as political program:

- **Bertolt Brecht:** *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder / Mother Courage and Her Children* (1941) [Epic theater, alienation]
- **Heiner Müller:** *Die Hamletmaschine / Hamletmachine* (1977) [Deconstruction of classical drama]

Exemplary Literary Works

Poetics of fragmentation:

- **Roland Barthes:** *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes / Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975) [Autobiography in fragments]
- **Walter Benjamin:** *Einbahnstraße / One-Way Street* (1928) [Aphoristic prose, thought-images]

Poetics of silence:

- **Maurice Blanchot:** *L'Attente l'oubli / Awaiting Oblivion* (1962) [Minimal dialogues, gaps]

Conceptual poetics:

- **Kenneth Goldsmith:** *Uncreative Writing* (2011) [Appropriation, plagiarism as method]

Authorial poetics practiced:

- **Georges Perec:** *W ou le souvenir d'enfance / W, or the Memory of Childhood* (1975) [Double structure: autobiography and utopia]
- **Marguerite Duras:** *L'Amant / The Lover* (1984) [Fragmentary autobiography, linguistic reduction]

Genre-critical poetics:

- **J.M. Coetzee:** *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) [Novel as lecture series]
- **W.G. Sebald:** *Austerlitz* (2001) [Pseudo-documentation, photographic integration]

Aesthetics of resistance:

- **Peter Weiss:** *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands / The Aesthetics of Resistance* (1975–1981) [Political poetics, documentary narration]

Seriality as poetics:

- **Karl Ove Knausgård:** *Min Kamp / My Struggle* (2009–2011, 6 vols.) [Extreme attention to detail, auto-fiction]

Poetics of unreliability:

- **Ford Madox Ford:** *The Good Soldier* (1915) [Paradigm of unreliable narration]

Experimental book form:

- **B.S. Johnson:** *The Unfortunates* (1969) [Book in loose-leaf collection]
- **Mark Z. Danielewski:** *House of Leaves* (2000) [Typographic experiments, footnote labyrinth]

Subcultural/experimental poetics:

- **William S. Burroughs:** *Naked Lunch* (1959) [Cut-up technique, anti-narrative structure]
- **Kathy Acker:** *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984) [Appropriation, pornographic collage]

Part C: Bestsellers as Negative Examples: Competency Deficits in Commercially Successful Literature

The following selection identifies commercially successful works that, from literary-critical and academic perspectives, exhibit grave competency deficits. Commercial success and literary quality are not identical.

1. WORLD KNOWLEDGE

Superficial research, clichés instead of knowledge:

- **Dan Brown:** *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) [Pseudo-historical "facts," gross art history errors, touristic superficial knowledge]
- **Paulo Coelho:** *O Alquimista / The Alchemist* (1988) [Esoteric kitsch as "wisdom," no substantial knowledge of traditions]
- **James Redfield:** *The Celestine Prophecy* (1993) [Spiritual tourism, no cultural understanding]
- **Rhonda Byrne:** *The Secret* (2006) [Pseudoscience as "universal law"]

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL LOGIC

Shallow, inconsistent, clichéd character psychology:

- **E.L. James:** *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) [Protagonists without inner life, psychologically implausible, problematic relationship patterns as "passion"]
- **Stephenie Meyer:** *Twilight* (2005) [Bella Swan: no personality beyond male validation, Edward: "mysterious" instead of psychological]
- **Mitch Albom:** *Tuesdays with Morrie* (1997) [Sentimental wisdom templates instead of characters]
- **Veronica Roth:** *Divergent* (2011) [Faction concept replaces psychological complexity]

3. STYLISTICS

Wooden prose, clichés, stylistic incompetence:

- **Danielle Steel:** (various novels) [Assembly-line style, cliché inflation, no stylistic distinction]
- **Cecelia Ahern:** *P.S. I Love You* (2004) [Sentimental phrases, stylistic poverty]
- **Nicholas Sparks:** *A Walk to Remember* (1999) [Kitsch prose, emotional manipulation through adjectives]
- **Mitch Albom:** *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (2003) [Didactic prose without literary aspiration]

4. DRAMATURGY

Mechanical plots, loss of tension, artificial conflicts:

- **Nicholas Sparks:** (various romance novels) [Predictable dramaturgy: meeting, obstacle, sentimental ending or death]
- **John Grisham:** (various legal thrillers) [Formulaic structures, mechanical twists]
- **Robert Ludlum:** *The Bourne Identity* (1980) [Action scene concatenation instead of dramaturgical structure]
- **Clive Cussler:** (Dirk Pitt series) [Episodic action without escalation, same formula]

5. NARRATOLOGY

Narratively incompetent, obtrusive, inconsistent:

- **Suzanne Collins:** *Mockingjay* (2010) [Narrative voice loses consistency, narrative convenience]
- **Cassandra Clare:** *City of Bones* (2007) [Inconsistent perspective, narrative tell-not-show]
- **Sarah J. Maas:** *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015) [Implausible first-person narrator, narrative conveniences]
- **Colleen Hoover:** *It Ends with Us* (2016) [Manipulative narrative perspective, inconsistent focalization]

6. CULTURAL REFERENCES

Name-dropping without understanding, pseudo-intellectual:

- **Yann Martel:** *Life of Pi* (2001) [Religion tourism, exoticizing portrayal without depth]
- **Ernest Cline:** *Ready Player One* (2011) [Reference overkill without transformation, nostalgia-pornographic name-dropping]
- **William P. Young:** *The Shack* (2007) [Religious clichés as "spiritual depth"]
- **Audrey Niffenegger:** *The Time Traveler's Wife* (2003) [Art historical references as pretentiousness]

7. POETICS

Poetic arbitrariness, genre-conformist without reflection:

- **James Patterson:** (various thrillers) [Industrial production, no poetic decision, pure formula, co-author assembly line]
- **Danielle Steel:** (various novels) [60+ novels following identical formula, no poetic position]

Exemplary Literary Works

- **Clive Cussler:** (various adventure novels) [Mechanical genre fulfillment without aesthetic reflection]
- **Nora Roberts:** (various novels) [200+ books under different pseudonyms, industrial novel production]